



The Age of Men

by *black9*

SI-OC the same age of Luke Castellan. Exploration of magic, psychology of demigods and gods as well. Understanding of the relationship between humans and the metaphysical, AU-ish, independent MC.

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Bullshit

I have found out that I enjoy writing SI-OC stories, mostly bringing common sense in fantasy worlds that I find full with illogical holes of some kind. I read the Percy Jackson series and honestly found a refreshing take on mythology, people that already read my stuff know that I have a soft spot for it. So, I'll play around with a demigod, and like always, I'll try to make sense of a world in which magic and whatnot are explained in a blurry way at best. That's the main reason behind my choice of character; beyond that, I'll be playing around a lot, that is the purpose of fanfiction. I'll try to keep my facts aligned with the books as much as I can, only adding a tiny bit of realism here and there.

Since my stories are from the POV of a more or less jaded character, they come out showing a bit more the dark side of the worlds they are written in. But... that's kind of the point.

Feel free to point out what does not make sense in your heads and spare me your angsty outbursts.

I don't own shit beyond my character.

Have Fun!

Thanks to Megapede for the beta-work!

BULLSHIT

The forest was vast and different from anything else I had ever seen.

I was a kid, barely five years old, and I had memories of at least two other lives before this one, so I knew what I was talking about. The woman who raised me, a certain Helen, told me she was my sister, and more importantly, she was a motherfucking witch, which

explained the absurdities of my home. I finished my usual break-neck run across the tall trunks (never leaving the trail) and walked into a garden that held a distinctly Mediterranean feel: myrtle, elderflower, laurel trees, I easily recognized a couple of olive trees.

The hut where I lived had grass over its roof, and a goat quietly munching over it, a chimney made with river stones, round and flat ones, with smoke leaving a trail up to the canopy of leaves which rarely let the sunshine through.

Thanks to my sister's lessons, I knew that we lived in the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska, which was the largest national forest in the United States at 16.7million acres, 68,000 square kilometers. Most of its area was part of the temperate rain forest, itself part of the larger Pacific temperate rain forest. Naturally, the forest was so much bigger without actually occupying the planet's surface that it was hilarious.

The important element that few considered was that the forest had been there since the last Ice Age, with only a few humans walking on the outskirts of it only in the last few centuries. In a place full of life, like that vast forest was, nature sings its tune. And where humans do not thread, magic learns to dance.

Never constrained, never marred by humans, the forest had grown. Every single tree, young or old, held more sway in the deep of the forest than any human could ever hope to understand. It was defined as an old-growth forest, also termed primary forest, virgin forest, primeval forest, late seral forest, or forest primeval.

Not to say that the forest or the single trees were sentient, no, but they were undoubtedly aware. Luckily, with my mother being a witch and me being born in the forest, I was safe, even if I refused to stray from the path.

I had never been one for respecting what others see as holy, but that place was a sanctuary.

Since my previous lives had, at least following my memories, actually happened, I had somewhat an open mind. Even so, the ground did not make any sense. Following the ling trail that moved in strange patterns around our home, sometimes I walked uphill, sometimes I slid down what felt like a grass-covered cliff. It was maddening. Or it would have been, if not for the kindly reassuring tune, the charm around my neck kept up, humming for my benefit, reminding the forest of my mother's power and friendship.

The forest, while from time to time, intimidating, was nothing short of otherworldly. There were thousands of western red cedar, Sitka spruce, and western hemlock everywhere. Limestone and granite that made the ground beneath the soil also made hills and caves. Creeks became torrents and ended up in little waterfalls, the water spraying a thin sheen of vapor over the ponds and occasionally birthing a rainbow, answering the rare touch of the sun.

All that mystery and lively thrum in the air, however, paled in confront with the magic inside my home. Once I had closed behind me the small oak door with a bronze brass, I took in the rest of the hut.

Circular, with a diameter of easily fifteen meters, it had regularly spaced windows along its wall, which was made of piled fluvial stones held together by thankfully not poisonous ivy. The monotony of the circular wall was also broken by a cheerfully lit fireplace, and shelves upon shelves of books and scrolls. I looked with loathing at the shelves reserved for my non-magical studies.

Ugh, it doesn't matter how long I live; there are so many times I can study math from the start. I sighed.

Even if I was sure I had lived before, the memories of my previous lives, while consistent and bright, were hazy at best on the emotional side. I remembered crying in desperation for something, but I couldn't remember why, I could remember having sex and falling in love, but not the warmth I felt then. Even names were something I couldn't recall at all.

I remembered that the first time I was reborn, I had to figure out everything from the fact that I was given another chance at life, to where and when I was, to what to do.

This time I had much less freedom of choice, but I wasn't bothered by it, somehow, even having an old soul, albeit, with toned-down memories, I still had all the childishness typical of... well, the child I was.

I glanced at the tall mirror on the side of the room, a curly and blond-haired child with heterochromatic eyes staring me back. My left eye bottle green, the color of my iris behaving like glass, changing its shade with the light, while the other was of a smoke-ish dark gray, with the occasional silver spark in it.

If those eyes didn't confirm the existence of magic, nothing would.

My still childishly chubby face hid the features I would one day have, but my nose was small and straight, and my chin almost sharp.

I then looked upwards, like always awed at the absolute darkness that lingered between the wooden beams that sustained the roof and the ceiling proper. I lowered my gaze and let it land on the two single beds, which doubled as benches for the long oak table and looked at my sister, bent over an uninteresting book on human anatomy.

My strange witch-mother, of whom I shared the grey-eye, sharp chin, and admittedly wicked grin. I narrowed my eyes, looking for it.

They were like particles of dust suspended in the air and hit by a ray of sun. I could see them with the corner of my eye, almost beyond my perception, but not quite.

I focused on it, seeing the particles of dust looking more and more like sparks suspended in a golden mist, and forcing my will, I parted the charm on the cover of the book, discovering an ancient-looking, leather-bound tome.

My sister closed it with a snap, her eyes finding mine and her lips turning in a mocking smirk. "It's far too early for you to deal with this." She spoke in ancient greek, the language singing in my head and words falling in place like pieces of a puzzle.

I huffed, not raising to the bait. "But since you are so curious..." She started, and my eyes snapped back on her like magnets, "... I will get you started on runes, what do you say?"

I smiled, running towards her and quickly climbing on the bench. I had an idea as to why we spoke greek even while being in the Americas, and the dates on the more mundane books placed us after 1980, but more than that, I couldn't know.

My sister knew that I wasn't an ordinary child, if only because of my being furious when I discovered I was dyslexic. In my every life, I had been an avid reader, finding out that words were barely beyond my grasp had been, not nice. I had felt betrayed, and suddenly much more vulnerable.

My previous life experiences had managed to give me some sort of edge when dealing with either English or Japanese, but knowing that smooth reading would always be beyond me was dreadful.

It didn't help that I lived without any kind of technology. My sister and I made light with candles or torches, and cooked thanks to the fireplace, either in the shiny copper pot or on the flat volcanic stone. It wasn't bad, but I would have enjoyed just kicking back and watching a movie.

My sister ruffled my hair and took out a sheet of white paper, the pencil in her tapping it thoughtfully for a few seconds.

"What do you think is the purpose of runes, Icarus?" Her soothing tone asked me.

I hid a grimace at my name, it wasn't exactly a lucky one, but I understood that whoever named me, either my mother or my father,

likely chose Icarus so that I could rise above the myth and actually reach the sun. That's some grade-A poetry right there.

"Well, ancient greek letters, besides being used for writing, don't have hidden meanings..." I started. "Not that I know of," I added, looking at my sister with narrowed eyes.

At her encouraging smile, I went on: "But alpha can mean a beginning, in the same way, beta can indicate a follower, and omega the end." I rubbed my chin, thinking about it.

"The real question would be why only these symbols have meaning, and why I can't make up one, or a whole alphabet." I continued.

My sister was beaming at me, and she bent forward: "What is the purpose of runes, Icarus?" she reminded me of her question.

I thought about it for a few seconds: "The one I give them? Since magic is also about intent?" I half answered, half asked.

She grabbed my face and kissed my forehead, a loud 'smooch' almost echoing in the hut.

Life, while a bit isolated, was good.

Seven years later

Usually, a twelve years old kid does not just pack his stuff and leave the enchanted forest on his own. For several reasons, but mostly, because

1) why the fuck would one wish to leave a magic place?

and 2) He is fucking twelve.

That very polished and undoubtedly exact reasoning did not apply to me. One day, my sister had vanished, without a hello, or a goodbye, simply... puff. Her shit and books had disappeared with her, along

with our goats and chickens, the usual absolute darkness between the wood beams supporting the roof and the actual ceiling gone with her. I recognized an eviction notice when I saw one.

I was feeling... hurt? betrayed? Something along those lines. Still, I had packed my stuff, got dressed, and left without looking back.

The forest had kept its uncaring attitude towards me, but I had been running in it for years, I felt that my welcome had come to an end.

I had donned my military cargo pants and brown leather boots, my cotton shirt, my wooden jumper, and my brown leather trench coat, the bag with my meager possessions on my back, and my bowie like knife secured at my waist. I had walked south for days, resting the least I could, continuously parting the confounding magic that tried to ensnare my senses, stopping only to eat my rations made of smoked salmon and drinking the apple juice I managed to bring with me.

I didn't want to sleep into an enchanted forest without protection, thank you very much. I tricked my body into not feeling tired, my muscles into not feeling the strain and my bones into not feeling the ache. My twelve years old body, while undoubtedly healthy, could only do so much. The days had blurred with the nights, and I kept going south.

After three days, the tall, unending trees and their oppressive leaves canopy let go of me. The difference was not evident to the untrained eye, but the wariness weighing on my shoulders had left me. I kept going, walking through the night, the light of the moon and stars was not enough to light my path, only to make me distinguish north from south, but I didn't mind. I had lived for years with absolute darkness above my head, having the nightly one all around me was not enough to paralyze me. At the dawn of the fourth day, the trees had parted, and I had reached the almost barren coastline. I let out a relieved sigh, suddenly feeling more at ease.

I reached a small clearing, and with the expertise gifted me by years of living in a forest, I brought together a vast amount of wood and

organized rocks into a twenty centimeters tall circle with a half meter of diameter. I walked to the nearest tree and etched an alpha into it with a hand trembling for my deep tiredness. Walking a counterclockwise circle, my knife etched a horizontal line on the trunk of every other tree until I reached again the first one.

I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and opened them again. With the familiarity born from years of practice, I recognized the not-real and not-actually-there dust particles suspended in a ray of sunshine, changing my focus on them and seeing them as ever-burning sparks suspended in a misty-fog. I willed it to warp in a circle, anchoring itself to the marks I had made with my knife, and when I saw the misty wall fall in place, I etched an omega under the alpha, locking it in place.

I amassed a bunch of wood in my stone circle and emptied on it half of the oil flask I had brought with me. Running the head of my knife's hilt on its sheath, I produced a waterfall of sparks, on the wood, which immediately started smoking, and soon burning. I placed around the circle the rest of the wood so that the would somewhat dry thanks to the warmth of the fire.

I left the clearing for a few minutes, coming back with several pine branches I had cut with a razor-sharp steel wire. *It always pays to be prepared.*

I placed the branches in a makeshift bed, isolating me from the warmth-eating ground, and finally allowed myself to fall asleep, my bag as a cushion, my magic as a shield.

A year later 12-may 1998

I was sitting at a coffee shop, lazily enjoying my continental breakfast, an eye on the paper I had taken from a nearby table.

"It will be fifteen bucks, kid." The waiter told me. If he found it strange that a thirteen years old kid was on his own, reading a paper and

having a breakfast that could fill two grown-up men, he didn't voice it.

I looked at him, and with a relaxed, vague gesture, I replied, "These are not the droids you're looking for." warping the golden fog around his head with a lack of care.

"These are not the droids I'm looking for." The man replied before leaving me alone.

Reaching civilization had its perks, beyond being able to magically trick the equivalent of muggles into believing that I had already paid for whatever shit I took, I managed to take up a paper and find out exactly when I was. It was cold, I was a bit without direction, but it was cool. I had reached New York six months before through very skillful use of the buses and common, helpful muggles that offered me a lift in their car. Magic was awesome, and I could safely ignore the obvious danger of accepting lifts by unknown people. The only question was: what to do now? I sighed, considering my options.

There is only one rule in New York: everyone is a nutcase. And my growing up in a forest had left me ill-equipped to deal with both the loudness of the place and the polluted air. That was why I had started living in an abandoned mansion in long island. It was isolated enough and had both electricity and running water; it was more than enough for me.

I had cut my hair short, stole a beautiful brand new pair of sunglasses (Ray-Ban for the win), and took up wearing sneakers instead of leather boots. Otherwise, my attire hadn't changed much; sure, I had an impressive collection of t-shirts from this or that rock band and hoodies, my first childhood dreams of going all 'Assassin Creed' with a white hood had come real after all.

Not that I went around murdering people, or climbing strangely on buildings, even if I had picked up parkour, my endless stamina demanding it. But I enjoyed it nevertheless. There were no secret quests, no cabals of evil old men, and no monsters to kill. Well, there where monsters, a lot of them, but they didn't harm anyone. I didn't

let them see me, cyclops, and whatnot were some bullshit I didn't want to deal with.

I wrapped myself in the fog that separated the world I lived in from the one ordinary humans frequented. I didn't wish to be seen, and so I wasn't. I eyed with a raised eyebrow the cyclops on the other side of the road, who was looking around suspiciously. I sighed; I had overstayed my welcome.

I walked to my loaded pick up (obviously stolen), and half an hour later, I reached the private road that led to my home. I felt the warped golden fog that I had folded in several layers and anchored with a lot of runes all over the place. I parked the pickup and started unloading the provisions I had taken whenever something struck my fancy. This time had been a leather armchair from a second-hand shop. I looked it with a heavy frown, I had ensnared the guy of the shop to help me with placing it on the loading floor of the pickup, and I didn't know how to take it down and take it beyond the few stairs that separated the ground from the door of the mansion.

I was strong for being thirteen years old, stronger than any preteen had any right to be, but I also didn't want to drop the comfy armchair on the ground.

I thought about it; briefly, it was going to be a hassle, but building some shit to low the armchair on the ground lightly was going to cost me both time and effort. I eyed the shovel resting against the wall... *If I found several of those, I could create some kind of ramp between the loading floor and the door...*

I sighed, climbing next to my new armchair and pushing it on the edge of the loading floor of the pickup.

"Please, don't break." I lifted my foot and pushed the chair down.

With a solid 'thump,' my new, beautiful leather armchair landed on the ground.

I sighed: "Nothing's ever easy." I muttered, unknowingly slipping into ancient greek.

19-June 1999

The night was annoyingly loud. No, scratch that, the rain was. There was so much thunder rumbling in the clouds that I was forced to warp the golden fog around the house to dampen the sounds coming from outside. It would last until morning, but still, what the fuck? In more than a year that I spent living in the once-abandoned mansion, I had never seen the sky behave like that.

I was enjoying a cup of tea in my armchair, distractedly reading the leather-bound book that was the collection of my observations on the magic of this world, trying to make head or tails out of it. The vinyl disc was spinning Midnight Rumbler, from the album 'Let it Bleed' of the Rolling Stones cheerfully opposing to the downpour outside.

However, I heard a clicking sound that was not part of the song, immediately identifying it with a door being lockpicked. I narrowed my mismatched eyes in the direction of the sound. That meant people. Which indicated that my, modestly speaking, very skillful bending of what I had come to define 'natural magic' had failed.

Luckily, the kitchen-living room where I spent most of my relax-time and where I had set up my music system was also equipped with kitchen knives.

I had my loyal bowie strapped at my side, like always, but it was wiser preparing for war. I rose from my comfortable armchair and picked up a couple of knives from the kitchen drawer, wrapping myself with the 'natural magic' in a cocoon with several layers. I walked in the corner next to the door and squatted down in the natural shadows; I had left my steaming teacup balanced on the armrest of the armchair, hoping that the intruder would be led to believe I was still there, unaware.

Over the music and the still dampened sounds of the downpour outside, I heard them walk in, before carefully crossing the threshold as quietly as they could.

Leading the way, there was a girl between 10 and 13 years old, shoulder-length, spiky black hair, electric blue eyes, and freckles across her nose. She had delicate features, despite those almost fairy-like traits, she wore a black T-shirt, tattered black jeans, and a leather jacket she was lithe, almost slender, which at her apparent age was somewhat rare.

After the punk girl came in a kid who looked fifteen-ish, with brown curly hair and brown eyes, he was on the tall side, around 1,70 meters. But there was something... I looked, in the same way, I had been trained to look at things that were there-but-not-there, and the air parted itself around the legs of my target. *A fucking satyr? Really?* I thought. The inconsistencies of the world I had been living in, lined themselves together, presenting a worrying picture.

After the motherfucking satyr came in a little girl, around six years old, trembling for the cold, she looked like an almost drown kitten, her blond hair almost dark brown since she was drenched. She was clutching a bronze knife as long as her forearm, and that awoke a blurry memory of an old story I had read once, lives before.

The last one was a boy, clearly the oldest, with sandy blonde hair cut short, blue eyes, a sharp nose, a sneaky look, and a golf mace on his hand. He was the boss of the strange-looking group, defending the rear, while the punk-rocker was the heavy hitter, and I had an inkling as who the two in the middle were.

They moved in, their eyes darting everywhere and not stopping over my hidden form. I moved silently, my will over the golden fog smothering even the barest sound of my footsteps until I was behind the last of the group. I brought my arms forward, in a parody of a hug, until the knife in my left hand pointed just below the ribcage of the target, and the blade in my right was at a hair breath from his

jugular. I could see his friends slowly crawling towards my empty armchair; the Rolling Stones uncaringly kept singing.

I suspected not only who they were, but also in which universe I was, but I was hardly reassured. If I knew something of this world, it was that fate was a bitch, and a very present one. "Normally, I would offer shelter to any child who asks." My voice cut the tense atmosphere, turning it into a rightly bellicose one. The shouts of surprise and the other three members of the group whirled on themselves ready for a fight.

"Ah, ah, ah." I tutted, making the knives known to my target skin: "A move and he dies." I spoke to the others, my eyes running over their forms.

"Your names and why you thought to crash in my home was a good idea." My eyes traveled to the six years old girl who was holding her knife so hard her hand was trembling. *But maybe it is fear.* I considered.

"And why you thought that giving a knife to a child was even remotely wise," I added as an afterthought.

The kid I was threatening with my knives was as still as a rock, knowing that moving backward would let me kill him with a knife in the lung, and that going forward would see him with a slit throat. Incredibly mature of him.

"L-l-l-lets just calm d-d-down." stammered the satyr.

"And I also want to know why the fuck three kids go around with a satyr," I added again.

That froze them. "You can see his legs?" the punk rocker asked, a frown developing on her face.

I raised an eyebrow, looking in her eyes. My silence underlined perfectly how much her question was stupid. She schooled her

expression, and after glancing at the position of my knives on the body of her companion, her shoulders sagged a bit. I didn't relax my stance, and expertly ignored the outraged muttering of the five years old, knife-wielding, girl.

"My name is Thalia Grace." She introduced herself. Shit. I thought.

"I'm-m-m Gg-g-g-r-r-ove-r-r-r Und-de-e-er-woo-od." Stammered the gobsmacked satyr—double shit. I still hoped it wasn't true.

"Luke," Spoke the one under the threat of being killed "Luke Castellan, and the little one busy glaring daggers into your skull is Annabeth Chase."

"Bullshit." I sighed. It was the most eloquent answer I could come up with.

Royal and Regular Bastards

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ROYAL AND REGULAR BASTARDS

"I'm going to let you go," I said. *Not that I have a choice.* "Do not attack me. It would be a hassle for everyone." Slowly, I distanced the knives from Luke and took a step back. The son of Hermes turned on himself, quickly but not in a threatening way. Uh, look at that, he's not an idiot.

I looked again at the trembling Annabeth, and my expression softened. I walked toward the kitchen table, where I put down the knives. "There's a bathroom on the next floor, with warm water, the first bedroom on the right after the stairs is mine, take clothes, and whatever you need to change, you'll be taking a cold otherwise." I calmly spoke.

I opened the refrigerator and started taking out stuff; I turned only to see Annabeth fiercely hugging Luke's waist, while he was trying to have a silent conversation with Thalia. I looked at Groover, tilting my head questioningly before taking out a cola can from the refrigerator

and emptying it into a tall glass. I placed the aluminum on the table and looked expectantly at the satyr.

"I'm waiting for an explanation of what you are," I repeated, opening another drawer and taking out a first aid kit, sliding it on the table towards the others. I had seen their bruises and several scratches on their skin after all.

Luke and Thalia had seemingly reached an agreement, and the punk-girl led the younger one out of the room, I distractedly heard them hopping on the stairs.

"So..." Luke started, his eyes scanning me multiple times. "...we introduced ourselves, who are you?"

I had no intention of answering the question. "You still need to tell me what you are, since nobody ever managed to reach my house in the year and a half that I have been occupying it. And why the child held a knife as long as her forearm." They both sighed. I picked out a couple of onions and started cutting them into little cubes, lighting up the cooker and placing a pan over it, pouring some olive oil in it before getting started with the tomatoes.

So they started explaining. Well, Luke did. "Greek mythology is real."

I blinked, but I did not interrupt. *He should learn how to deliver critical information.*

I placed a boiler over another cooker and looked unimpressed at the demigod in front of me. "I'm..." he gritted his teeth "I'm a demigod, Thalia and Annabeth demi goddesses."

And then he gave me a resume of his last year of running across the continent. I poured the boiling water into a pot, switching it with the boiler over the still lit cooker, before throwing in it a handful of salt and pouring in 7 hg of pasta. "How did you cross the golden fog around this place?" I asked, tossing the diced tomatoes in the full pan along with the onions.

"I-i-it's called the Mist." Grover offered, his stuttering finally dying down.

"That is not the answer to the question I made, is it?" I objected—*shit shittity shit. Just my luck, I had to land in a world just about to face two divine wars.* So they started again, and between one and the other, they managed to give me a picture of the world we lived in. Ten minutes later, I poured the now cooked pasta into a colander, shaking it a little bit before tossing it all in the pan with the onions and tomatoes. I lowered the flame under it to the bare minimum and mixed the pasta with the vegetables.

"Grover got us lost, and Annabeth ran after an owl. We ended up here; the mansion looked abandoned..." Luke quipped. I turned my unimpressed mismatched eyes on the satyr, before sighing.

"The girls should be finished," I said, hearing the footsteps coming down the stairs. I picked a few basil leaves from the potted plant and tossed them into the pan, before taking out a chunk of Parmigiano (it had been a bitch stealing that) and grating it over the pasta.

I placed the pan in the middle of the table just when the girls came back in. Thalia had helped herself to my AC/DC T-shirt, and Annabeth looked dead on her feet. I slid five plates on the table and filled them, leaving some pasta in the pan for seconds. I ate first, reassuring them that it wasn't poisoned, while Grover happily devoured the coke can I had emptied before. Even in her exhausted state, Annabeth managed to give me a heated glare. I rolled my eyes: "I'm sorry I almost butchered you, but next time, knock."

Luke snorted: "It's okay; I would have done the same."

"But..." Annabeth whirled on him.

"But nothing," the son of Hermes interrupted, "We broke into his home; it's only right he is defensive... by the way, what's your name?"

I watched amusedly at Annabeth who looked at Thalia for her opinion, the older demigoddess simply shrugged: "It's fair." then her eyes narrowed, sparks dancing off her fingertips "But pull another stunt like that and I'll..."

"Glare cutely at me." I interrupted with a smile, "My name's Icarus. And I'm likely a demigod, so I'll come with you."

"Just like that?" Luke asked, preventing Thalia from reacting to my taunt.

"What were the odds of you three casually bumping into me?" I retorted, "I recognize a divine intervention when it bitchslaps me out of the blue. So yes, I'm coming with you, I don't fancy living in a house surrounded by whatever shit is hunting you. We can take the pickup tomorrow morning. Unless a god is charging at the head of the monsters following you, they'll roam in the surroundings. But the... Mist, was it? I used, it will hold only for so long."

Luke nodded slowly: "Sounds like a plan."

I finished my midnight pasta and rose from the kitchen table. "I'll need to pack. Spark-girl," I turned toward Thalia, who was already gritting her teeth "I do have some AC/DC albums." I pointed to my vinyl stash on the side of the records player. "Feel free to change the music." I turned and walked toward the door: "And no offense, Luke, Grover, but you stink. Take a goddamn shower." I said over my shoulder.

The following morning saw my unlikely company gathered into the kitchen/living room. I watched out of the window; the sky was still rumbling, the rain still heavily attempting to drown us. "Well, you look better," I said after a look at my unlikely companions. "Take whatever you want from the house. I'm abandoning it anyway."

I saw Thalia's eyes briefly dart to my stash of pieces of vinyl and snorted. "There is space on the loading floor of the pickup, go crazy."

Half an hour later, I had finished securing under an oilskin all the shit that my four companions had deemed worthy of being taken away. "Thalia and Luke with the cargo, tie yourselves somewhere with that rope, I don't want to toss you away on a sharp turn," I advised.

I took the driver seat: "I'll drive, and Annabeth will keep an eye on Grover, who'll tell me where to go."

Luke nodded, and stopped Annabeth from objecting: "Thalia and I will toss around the monsters if they try to jump on us, and I'd feel better if you were to keep an eye on our last team member."

He shot me an apologetic glance there, I simply rolled my eyes and smirked, giving Annabeth something safe to do was on the priority list of everyone, and since Grover didn't know how to drive, leaving the son of Hermes, and the daughter of Zeus together was our best bet. They knew each other, and they knew how to fight together in case it was necessary, and something in my gut told me we were going to need them.

I turned on the pickup, and we hit the road. While listening to Grover's indications, my eyes were darting all around the sides of the road, and my mind was flipping in every direction. I didn't remember exactly what happened in the books, I had read them only once, lives before. I knew only a few details here and there, like that Annabeth, in the end, banged Percy, and that there was also a roman camp.

I also considered that the rain, while maybe useful in masking our scents, also reduced the natural illumination, cutting our sight shorter than I would have liked it. Everything was almost in shades of gray.

Is it weird knowing that the seven years old girl will end up together with another seven years old kid? I wondered distractedly.

I shrugged in the safe boundaries of my mind. It wasn't the strangest shit I had ever ended up in. The heavy rain had turned the uneven road into a slippery slide towards hell, so I hardly ever surpassed the

50 km/h. It was faster than we could run, so it was still a gain. We had no problems for the first half an hour of travel.

Then I heard the first thud: "Fuck you!" And the flash of lightning, followed by a low 'boom' almost like a shy thunder.

I lowered the window on my left and shouted out into the rain: "Language! There's a child on board!"

"I'm not a child." Annabeth hissed, but I heard a startled laugh over the surrounding chaos. Honestly? I was fucking scared.

"I meant Grover; he forgot to pee before we left and asked me to stop the car." I soothed the outraged seven years old. The satyr tried to put up a defense, but Annabeth was implacable: "But we can't stop!" she gasped, staring at Grover with wide, unbelieving eyes.

"Turn right!" The satyr in question shouted, hoping to avoid being the focus of a scared kid who needed an outlet. I turned the wheel, following orders: "That's what I told him, but he was whining. Hence, he's like a child." I explained.

Another flash of lightning lighted up our surroundings for a second: "Yeah! I'll deep fry your asses!" an acute voice exclaimed.

The clang of metal against metal, and an unhuman grunt later, Luke retorted: "Asses is a bad word, Thalia!"

The fact that I could hear him over the rain and the sound of the engine made clear that he was making an effort to be heard. At that moment, I realized that the two demigods were likely just as scared as me and were reacting in the same way as me. Honestly? It was exhilarating. I frowned, recognizing the alien excitement in my chest. It was like a part of me enjoyed fighting for my life. *I think I just found another reason why demigods tend not to get old.*

"Turn left here." Groover bleated.

I cursed, slowing down in the most steady way possible, acutely aware of the two demigods standing on the loading floor of the pickup. "Next time, warn me 200 meters before the turn." I grumbled, "Not on the crossroad."

"No matter, we need to finish on foot." He answered vindictively. I rolled my eyes.

"Hop down; we need to run! Grover, take Annabeth!" I shouted out of the window.

I noticed a shadow quickly approaching and slammed open the door on my left, kicking it with both my feet. I hit the shadow, that retreated under the rain only to try again once I had left the vehicle. I didn't think. The rain keeping me strangely awake, I twirled on myself, letting the shadow graze me. As soon as it surpassed me, I slammed closed the pickup's door, enjoying the sid crunch of something that broke under the door's momentum.

I took out my bowie, and distractedly, I realized that I was cackling madly. I was alive; I was alive; I was alive. Another flash of lightning, and the darkness around us, previously only cut by the pickup's headlights, disappeared, I could see only white.

"Aaargh!" I screamed, "Fuck you, Sparky! I can't see shit now!" Thalia was laughing, drunk on power, and on the same adrenaline that was keeping me alive. I heard a series of raindrops hitting something higher than me, behind. Once again, I didn't think. I rolled forward, wincing when the impact against the ground made the air escape my lungs. I need to practice this. I distractedly noticed. Then I felt a razor-thin burn across my back. I grunted in pain, too busy trying to understand where the fuck I was supposed to go if I couldn't see shit.

"This way!" I heard Groover exclaim.

I started to walk in that direction when a hand closed on my arm. I twirled the bowie in my hand and began to jab in the direction of my

new offender when he spoke: "It's me!"

"Luke, Thalia blinded me!" I whined.

"So I heard." I put on my trusty sunglasses and started to blink quickly, eager to gain back my sight. Luke handed me something. I let him guide me for a few running steps before I managed to distinguish shapes again.

"Why are you giving me my shovel?" I asked as soon as I recognized it.

"Because dealing with dogs is easier with a long weapon, c'mon, Thalia bought us time, let's not waste it." was his clipped answer. We ran ahead, swirling through the trees and quickly catching up with the rest of our lame A-team.

"Why the fuck do we have Dobermanns on our heels?" I asked quickly, my knife returned to its sheath on my belt, and the shovel held like a battle-ax.

"Hellhounds, don't you see they have red eyes?" Annabeth corrected me. I would have been offended by her dismissive tone, but considering that she was being carried like a football ball under the armpit of a running satyr, I choose to let go. Maybe. I whirled, slamming the edge of the shovel on the Doberman that dared to come too close.

"Well, aren't you smart? You already figured out that people do love to be corrected by bratlings." I retorted with an enthusiastic tone.

Thalia, however, was soon lagging, the lightning storm of before had taken a lot out of her, and there she was, magic spear and shield out and shiny. I sighed, dropping my shovel: "Hop on." I ordered, she made to object, but I cut her off: "Trust in Luke to keep us safe, I'm warping the Mist around us as I speak, they won't see us."

And I wasn't laying: The almost invisible dust particles suspended under the rain gave way to the Mist, that I churned and spun tightly around us.

It was a single layer, but it was covering five fucking people. So I wasn't going to berate myself. All the adrenaline we had running through our bodies was somewhat... wasted. Soon enough, we crossed an invisible boundary; it was very similar to the difference I had felt when I left the forest I was born into, a year and a half before. The angst and stressful run had an underwhelming conclusion.

But I felt it in my bones, the rain stopped, and the sky ceased its incessant rumble. I even felt the clouds part, letting the sunshine hit the girl I was carrying on my back. I glanced over my shoulder and almost snorted: she had fallen asleep.

"We made it." wheezed Grover.

We must've been on the north shore of Long Island, and paradoxically, we were at the beginning of a valley that marched up to the ocean, which churned unhappily about a mile in the distance. Between here and there, I could hardly process everything I was seeing. The landscape was dotted with buildings that looked like they belonged to ancient Greek architecture: an open-air pavilion, an amphitheater, a circular arena...

Only that they all looked brand new, with white marble columns sparkling in the sun, I expected it, but seeing it was for real somewhat sealed the fact that I had ended up in yet another fictional world.

An hour later, the cut across my back had been stitched, Thalia had recovered enough to stand on her own two feet, and our surprisingly successful A-team was standing before who I supposed they were Dionysus and Chiron.

The man facing us was small but porky. He had a red nose, big watery eyes, and curly hair so black it was almost purple. He looked almost like a cherub—a cherub who'd turned middle-aged in a trailer park. The centaur had been lying on the ground, playing cards distractedly with the god. Chiron looked us with a spark in his eyes, which dimmed a bit when it crossed Grover's gaze, before tilting his head questioningly towards Dionysus.

"I am Chiron." the centaur introduced himself, "And he is Dionysus, but, since names are important, he will be referred to as Mr. D."

The alcoholic in withdrawal looked us once over with bloodshot eyes and heaved a great sigh. "Oh, I suppose I must say it. Welcome to Camp Half-Blood. There. Now, don't expect me to be glad to see any of you, half-bloods."

"We are of one mind, then." I cheerfully quipped, happily noticing the look of dismay on Grover's face and the poorly disguised grin of Chiron's face.

"You already know what you are and why you are here then. Good, now you can scam." The pudgy little man grumbled.

"But then, why are you here?" Annabeth asked with a frown.

Chiron winked at her. "Mr. D offended his father a while back, took a fancy to a wood nymph who had been declared off-limits."

"A wood nymph," Luke repeated.

"Yes," Mr. D confessed. "Father loves to punish me. The first time, Prohibition. Ghastly! Horrid ten years! The second time—well, she was pretty, and I couldn't stay away—the second time, he sent me here. Half-Blood Hill. Summer camp for brats like you. 'Be a better influence,' he told me. 'Work with youths rather than tearing them down.' Ha. Unfair."

"I agree." I nodded.

Noticing the questioning looks I've been thrown, and the raised eyebrow from the god who turned people into dolphins for shit and giggles, I hastily explained: "Only because you say it's illegal to breathe, it doesn't mean anyone is going to obey. Only because you declare illegal falling, gravity doesn't stop acting. That's what Zeus did with declaring a nymph off-limits for Dionysus."

The sky rumbled, a single grey cloud hovering over us. "And taking away alcohol would be horrible to the average 30years old, taking wine away from him is the equivalent to taking away water from a fish. Only, he's immortal, and so he suffers instead of dying."

"Did you just compare me to a fish, Igor?" the drunk in withdrawal asked with a flat tone.

"A very cool one," I answered without thinking about it. "Sir," I added as an afterthought.

"I'll show them around." Chiron said, his tone implying clearly 'before Icarus get himself killed.' "Follow, children." He quietly ordered, and we were just a bit too tired to whine about it, so we followed. We walked through the strawberry fields, where campers were picking bushels of berries while a satyr played a tune on a reed pipe. Chiron told us the camp grew an excellent crop for export to New York restaurants and Mount Olympus. "It pays our expenses," he explained. "And the strawberries take almost no effort, Mr. D has this effect on fruit-bearing plants: they just go crazy when he was around."

"Granted, it works best with wine grapes, but Mr. D is restricted from growing those, so we make do with strawberries instead.

"So..." I started when the silence stretched for more than ten seconds: "You said your name was Chiron. Are you..."

He smiled down at me. "The Chiron from the stories? Trainer of Hercules and all that? Yes, Icarus, I am."

"Didn't you die taking Prometheus place? I'm pretty sure you are a constellation." I objected.

Chiron paused as if the question intrigued him. "I honestly don't know. I should be. The truth is, I can't be dead. You see, eons ago, the gods granted my wish. I could continue the work I loved. I could be a teacher of heroes as long as humanity needed me. I gained much from that wish... and I gave up much. But I'm still here, so I can only assume I'm still needed."

"And you were taught both by Artemis and Apollo, is that right?" I asked again.

The centaur nodded, raising an eyebrow at my surprising knowledge of mythology. "Any chances you're willing to teach healing?" I questioned.

"Why healing?" Thalia asked tiredly, likely bored from the adrenaline-inducing trip. "Because not knowing how to heal yourself is dumb as fuck that's why," I explained.

"Language." Luke admonished me.

"No, it's fine." Annabeth jumped in my defense: "Grover isn't here." she wisely explained.

My lips twitched upwards, and I saw Thalia turning away to hide a smile. While Luke nodded sagely, keeping up the running joke: "You're right, Annabeth, how silly of me."

Chiron watched our exchange with a faint smile, likely catching up on the inside joke, before answering my original question: "I usually teach to Apollo's children, since they are the more attuned to it, but I don't see why you shouldn't be able to join." I nodded my thanks, and the tour continued. We saw a warehouse-like building, where the weapons and armors were kept, the archery range, the canoeing lake (which in my head sounded stupid, there was the ocean less than a mile from the beginning of the valley), the stables (which

Chiron didn't seem to like very much), the javelin range, the sing-along amphitheater, and the arena.

In the end, he showed us the cabins. There were twelve of them, nestled in the woods by the lake, arranged in a U. Two at the base and five in a row on either side. Except for the fact that each had a large brass number above the door (odds on the left side, evens on the right), they looked nothing alike. Number nine had smokestacks, like a tiny factory. Number four had tomato vines on the walls and a roof made out of real grass. Seven seemed to be made of solid gold, which gleamed so much in the sunlight it was almost impossible to look at. They all faced a commons area about the size of a soccer field, dotted with Greek statues, fountains, flower beds, and a couple of basketball hoops.

In the center of the field was a huge stone-lined firepit. Since the rain had stopped, the temperature had risen again, so it was a hot day. Even so, the hearth smoldered. A girl about nine years old was tending the flames, poking the coals with a stick. I stilled, poking cautiously at the Mist, which was almost carefully flowing around her.

It wasn't something that happened naturally. The Mist was inert, it instinctively hid the 'supernatural,' I could recognize when it was warped in some strange way, sure sign of an illusion of some kind, but I never saw it behave in that way. *Well, almost never... Fucking hell, another goddess.* Then, it clicked the knowledge of mythology of every kind coming at my rescue: Hestia.

I quickened my steps, reaching again the group that almost left me behind. I looked around, the pair of cabins at the head of the field, numbers one and two, looked like his-and-hers mausoleums, big white marble boxes with massive columns in front. Cabin one was the biggest and bulkiest of the twelve. Its polished bronze doors shimmered like a hologram so that from different angles, lightning bolts seemed to streak across them. Cabin two was more graceful somehow, with slimmer columns garlanded with pomegranates and flowers. The walls were carved with images of peacocks. I stopped for just a moment in front of the first cabin on the left: cabin three

wasn't high and mighty like cabin one, but long, low, and solid. The outer walls were of rough gray stone, studded with pieces of seashell and coral as if the slabs had been hewn straight from the bottom of the ocean floor.

Most of the other cabins were crowded with campers. Number five was bright red, a real nasty paint job as if the color had been splashed on with buckets and fists. The roof was lined with barbed wire. A stuffed wild boar's head hung over the doorway, and its eyes seemed to follow me. Inside I could see a bunch of girls and boys arm wrestling and arguing with each other while metal music blared.

"So, I get why Artemis and Hera's houses are empty, but why number one and three look brand new?" I asked, already knowing the answers.

"Demigods born from either the master of the sky, the sea, or the underworld are powerful, more powerful than it's prudent." Chiron started, his voice keeping the calm and yet incisive tone that made him such an effective teacher. "So, after WWII, they agreed to no longer sire children among humans."

I coughed, masking a laugh at the scrunched face Thalia was making: "Well, you aged well, you don't look a year over thirty-five." I joked at her.

There, Chiron stopped, looking questioningly at the girl, who, with a roll of her eyes, raised her hand, white-hot sparks and small bolts of lightning running among her fingertips. The centaur sighed slowly.

"Until your father claims you as his, we'll treat you as undetermined." And that was all that there was to be said on the topic. The afternoon was spent aimlessly roaming, and soon enough, we were all called for dinner. There were maybe a hundred campers, a few dozen satyrs, and a dozen assorted wood nymphs and naiads. At the pavilion, torches blazed around the marble columns. A central fire burned in a bronze brazier the size of a bathtub. Each cabin had its table, covered in white cloth trimmed in purple. Four of the tables

were empty, Hera, Poseidon, Zeus, Artemis. But cabin eleven's was way overcrowded. I had to squeeze on to the edge of a bench with half my butt hanging off.

Finally, Chiron pounded his hoof against the marble floor of the pavilion, and everybody fell silent. He raised a glass. "To the gods!"

Everybody but me raised their glasses. "To the gods!"

Wood nymphs came forward with platters of food: grapes, apples, strawberries, cheese, fresh bread, and barbecue. My glass was empty, but spying the kids around, I saw them asking the glass what they wanted. "Iced water," I said, and like magic, the glass-filled itself. Once more, I realized that manipulating the Mist was only scratching the surface of what magic could do. I thought about Circe, and while turning men into pigs wasn't, exactly my dream, maybe I could learn how to do a Harry Potter worthy Transfiguration.

I loaded my plate and was about to take a big bite when I noticed everybody getting up, carrying their plates toward the fire in the center of the pavilion. Exchanging a raised eyebrow with the strange companions of my recent adventure, I rose too. As I got closer, I saw that everyone was taking a portion of their meal and dropping it into the fire, the ripest strawberry, the juiciest slice of beef, the warmest, most buttery roll. I couldn't help wondering why an immortal, all-powerful being would like the smell of burning food. I wished I knew what god's name to say, but after a second spent wondering about my goals, I tossed a quarter of my food into the fire, whispering 'Hecate,' under my breath. And tilting my head respectfully towards the flame, I threw a slice of meat: "Apollo." I wanted to learn magic medicine, after all.

When everybody had returned to their seats and finished eating their meals, Chiron pounded his hoof again for our attention. Mr. D got up with a huge sigh. "Yes, I suppose I'd better say hello to all you brats. Well, hello. Our activities director, Chiron, says the next capture the flag is Friday. Cabin five presently holds the laurels."

A bunch of enthusiastic cheering rose from the Ares table. *Good for them.* I thought.

"Personally," Mr. D continued, "I couldn't care less, but congratulations. Also, I should tell you that we have several new campers today. Tully Brake, Annie Phase, Duke Jellal, and Igor." Chiron shook his head, and stomped his hoof once again: "Thalia Grace, Annabeth Chase, Luke Castellan, and Icarus." he corrected, visibly containing an eye-roll.

Dionysus nodded like he didn't say our names wrong on purpose: "That's right. Hurrah, and all that. Now run along to your silly campfire. Go on."

Everybody cheered. We all headed down toward the amphitheater, where Apollo's cabin led a sing-along. I heard camp songs about the gods been sung and jokes being thrown around, and the funny thing was, there was a part of my mind that felt almost... like it was being soothed, like I only had to let go to feel at home. Recognizing the effect of something trying to affect my mind, I willed myself through it, shredding the subtle magic.

I narrowed my eyes and looked around, finding Hestia by the fire, her welcoming eyes looking at me... sadly?

I sighed and rose from my place. *How many times will I be able to chat with a God who is not a complete jackass without being interrupted?* I walked towards her, the roaring fire felt warm and welcoming instead of scalding and thirst inducing. I plopped down on the side of the goddess. "So..." I started, "How's godhood treating you?"

She raised her eyebrows, a faint smile marrying her face: "How's magic treating you?" I tilted my head questioningly in her direction, but I could only see the mirth in her eyes. I wasn't exactly surprised that she knew, after all, I had just broken her light attempt at trapping me into a 'and they lived forever happily.'

I shrugged: "I would have preferred not having to abandon my home only because Minerva felt like butting in."

Hestia scrunched her nose in distaste: "Don't use our roman names." She quietly admonished me.

I raised an eyebrow at her; I remembered something from the books, but... "An acute case of schizophrenia, uh?"

She turned back to stare into the fire, a slight frown marring the face of the nine years old child: "Not many talk to me."

"Not many can keep up interesting conversations; you're not missing much." I retorted, not changing the target of my eyes. I could stare into the fire any day of the week, how often could I watch a goddess? Well, in this life of the mine, it could happen often, but it is still a new opportunity.

Her lips twitched almost mischievously: "This appearance of mine doesn't hide the answers to your questions."

"It's thanks to you that a hundred of demigods can stay together for long periods without killing each other. It's a beautiful power." I argued. "It helps that they are dragged here before they're able to form an independent idea of the world, and are often starved for their parents' attention." I continued. And frowning lightly, I examined my feelings of the day, in particular the strange exhilaration that I felt during the fight. "I bet that the divine part of us strives to become more, searching for challenges or the approval of those that are more... godly? Than us." I reasoned out loud.

Hestia turned towards me, the face of the nine years old a blank. Was she assessing the kind of threat to her family that I represented? She was the goddess of the hearth, after all. "Why there aren't homes for the other gods?" I asked, "Ignoring Hypno, Morpheus, Iris, you..." my smile assumed a mocking tilt: "Not very family-friendly, is it?"

"It's not, but sometimes one has to give, in order to be given, instead of taking only to keep taking." She minutely shook her head.

"How is Gandhi's philosophy serving you?" I asked, genuinely curious.

She gestured around us, I looked, seeing the hundred or so of kids mingling and laughing. I also noticed that the oldest among them looked twenty. "You tell me." I heard. And when I turned to look at her, she was gone.

Suddenly, the fire became silent, its light dimming. Lights danced down from the sky like Northern Lights, and out of nowhere, a grayish column developed over Annabeth's head, a silvery owl idly watching down on us, it then turned into a spear.

Chiron walked into the crowd, tilting his head respectfully towards the hologram. "All hail Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena Pallas, Gray Eyes and Goddess of Council!"

Everyone was quick to climb to their feet and bowed lightly towards the newly claimed demigoddess, while her half brothers and sisters quickly circled her. I remained laying down in the place I had been sharing with Hestia, feeling the warmth of the hearth closing on me like a cocoon, likely shielding me from the sight of the gods. I added my spin to it, effortlessly warping the Mist around my body to hide from the mortals.

A bronze-brown light shone upon Luke, who grimaced, a caduceus slowly spinning over his head: "All hail Luke Castellan, son of Hermes Of the Market-Place, Of Crafts, Of Wiles, Of Road-Intersections, Of the Games, Keeper of the Flocks, Ram-Bearer, Translator, patron of travelers and thieves!"

Finally, a pure white light danced upon Thalia, a lightning bolt turning into a majestic eagle. Chiron knelt, and so did everyone else: "All hail Thalia Grace, daughter of Zeus Of Pledges and Promises, King of the Gods, King of all Greeks, Bearer of the Aegis."

The northern Lights retreated into the sky, and I mentally thanked Hestia. I wasn't big on kneeling. Half an hour later, the sparks from the campfire were curling into a starry sky, and conch horn blew again, we all filed back to our cabins.

Cabin 11 was overcrowded, a lot crowded, I collapsed on my borrowed sleeping bag, sharing a smirk with Luke, who had instead received a proper bed, being a Royal Bastard and all. The chat with Hestia had been interesting, and I fell asleep looking forward to seeing if my belongings were still on my abandoned pickup. *The first task for tomorrow: find a way to build me a house or even a room somewhere in the woods.*

I heard a fart and stupid, childish giggling.

A private sleeping arrangement was a must, or cabin 11 would quickly turn from being an overcrowded dormitory to a cemetery.

I Want a Jukebox

Thanks to Megapede for the beta-work!

I WANT A JUKEBOX

During the next few days, I settled into a routine that felt almost normal, if you don't count the fact that I was getting lessons from satyrs, nymphs, and a centaur. But, having been raised by a fucking witch, I didn't have room to complain.

The crack of dawn on my first day at half-blood hill saw me sneaking out of cabin 11, and I made my way down to the Pavilion, glancing distractedly at the always smoldering heart in the middle of the common courtyard. Hestia was nowhere to be seen.

Pity, I liked chatting with her.

The camp was shrouded in the morning fog, but I didn't mind the cool, nebulized water that awoke me completely.

The food was already on the tables, and the bathtub-wide brazier wasn't lit. So sacrifices only at dinner?

I sat down, filling my plate, and chugging orange juice.

A thump made me raise my eyes: Thalia had settled down in front of me, her hair a complete mess, and her face clearly expressing how much she loathed being awake. I smirked.

"Well. Hello, princess." I hailed the daughter of Zeus.

She grimaced a bit, vaguely pointing at me with a knife, before filling her plate.

"Too early for bantering, I take it?"

She grunted. Okay.

"Invite me to live in your cabin, and I'll gift you the shirt of the AC/DC you were wearing yesterday." I offered, hoping to exploit her still half-asleep state.

She froze, half stick of bacon dangling from her mouth. She chewed, swallowed, proceeded to ask for water in her glass, and washed her face with it.

The change was immediate, half-lidded, tired eyes left space to twin orbs glowing cobalt blue, her vaguely suffering face turned into a smug one.

"I want all of your rock-band t-shirts." she counter-offered.

"Two."

"Half." she narrowed her eyes.

"Five."

"I want ten, and I get to pick." her smile was showing too many teeth to make me comfortable.

"Six, so with the AC/DC one, you get a shirt for each day of the week. Final offer." I offered her my hand to shake.

She accepted. Yahoo!

"She tricked you." Luke sat down at my right, a mischievous smile on his face.

"Yesterday you weren't listening, you can't sleep in a cabin that's not yours." He popped my bubble.

Shit.

"I still needed a place where I could leave the stuff on the pickup. Have you seen the others in cabin 11? It's like Juvie." Not that I ever lived in one.

I chose to see the glass half-full "It may not happen to you, being a Royal Bastard and all, but being a Regular Bastard, I had to tie my shoes to my calves to make sure they wouldn't be mysteriously gone during the night."

While each morning, Luke, Annabeth, and Thalia took Ancient Greek from a smug-looking 14 years old son of Athena, they were about the gods and goddesses in ancient greek. I clearly knew my shit, and thusly refused to attend, I spent my time running through the woods, weaving under branches and loosing against nymphs. The little bitches knew how to run, that's for sure. I didn't train only my body, getting used to manipulating the mist around me while in movement instead.

Invisibility for me, for that branch, twisting the Mist so that it would copy something that wasn't there... basically high-grade illusions.

The rest of the day rotated through outdoor activities.

I did not piss at archery either, in my book, staying away from the enemy and swarming him with arrows was a great plan, so I often trained with the Apollo kids. While I didn't have any exceptional talent for it, I could learn. I was also hoping to get an in with Chiron's healing lessons. The centaur had forgotten to tell me that before teaching me anything magic-healing related, I had to memorize something like two thousand herbs, fungi, and random venoms from dusty old books. Apollo kids had it easy, they were naturally attuned to healing, and as such, they instinctively knew which plants to use.

I ignored canoeing; it seemed a stupid thing to learn. However, swimming was another kettle of fish entirely. For all my traveling, I had never entered a natural body of water. It was different.

I could feel some kind of... alive, alive, alive vibe from the water. There was a power in it, something...

It felt alive in the same way the forest I grew up in had felt when I stretched my metaphysical fingers towards that power, it slipped through, and I was left trying to grab water. It's worthy of further investigation.

My straight-combat training began after the first week when I first made my way into the sandy arena. Luke and Thalia were attending their ancient greek lessons, so I was alone.

I browsed the training weapons, selecting a couple of daggers, a sword that felt more like a mace than anything else, and a wooden spear without tip. I placed myself in a dismissed portion of the arena and got started with the sword.

Slash from up to bottom. Ha, the sword going from vertical to perfectly parallel to the ground.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Forcing muscles to learn a routine was boring shit.

"Look, fresh meat." A voice directed to me interrupted my self-imposed torture. A sixteen years old son of Ares was marching towards me, a couple of goons on each side. They all wore armors, complete with helmets, and they were holding a shield on their left arm, a big-ass bronze shield, if it weighed less than 15kg, I was a wood nymph.

"He's using our space, James." Goon number one said.

I sighed tiredly. Ah, dick-measuring contest. I'm surprised it took that long.

Nobody wanted to piss off Thalia, with her being the daughter of the big bad boss and all that, while Annabeth was 7, and thus beneath notice. Luke was the son of Hermes, meaning that the bosses of cabin 11 kept out an eye for him. That left me as 'the new kid' to bully around.

"Well, if he gives me those sunglasses of his, I might even not maim him." Goon two added.

I tilted my head, watching alternatively between my blunted sword and the helmets sitting on the heads of the five idiots.

I took a deep breath and shaped the Mist. It clung on me like a second skin, mimicking the movement of my chest with each breath.

I stepped sideways, invisible, leaving behind an Icarus shaped illusion paralyzed by fear.

"Look at him; he can't even move." Goon number five sneered and walked forward to my hologram.

I steadied myself, rolling my shoulders to make sure they weren't stiff and swung the sword like a baseball mace, the flat of the blade crashing on the side of the head of the Goon number one.

The wannabe bullies froze for a second, immediately bringing out their weapons and looking at my hologram warily. It didn't help that my illusion had sprouted a mocking smirk on his own.

Another thing I need to understand properly. I frowned lightly; sometimes, my illusions became more real than I pictured them to be.

I stalked forward until I was behind the group: with two precise swings, another two sons of Ares went down.

The hologram of me unraveled, leaving the last two wannabe bullies to fight back to back against an enemy that didn't register on their

senses. I chose to work on my psychological warfare skills.

"Eeny, meeny, miny, moe

Catch a bully by the toe

If it squeals cut it off,

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe." I singsonged, my voice echoing around them.

I choose to leave James (who I believed was the boss of the Ares cabin) last. I could use an instructor after all.

Still invisible, I stomped as hard as I could my heel on the goon's toe, likely breaking it (seriously, who wears sandals when going to fight?).

When he bent down to try and grab me, I slammed the hilt on my sword against his nose, breaking it and sending him in the realm of unconsciousness.

I jumped back, unraveling the Mist around me and smiling cheerfully at James, who had whirled on me, his eyes warily darting around.

"Relax, I'm real, and I won't maim you." I started, taking off my sunglasses and attaching them on the hem of my shirt. "I can try to teach you how to see instead of looking." I offered.

The son of Ares was tall and bulky, and admittedly he made for a scary figure. He kept his shield raised, wisely not trusting my words: "Why would you do it?"

"You are the counselor of the Ares kids, meaning that you're the best in a straight fight, is that true?"

When he nodded, I continued: "Hermes is the god of trade, is he not? As a member of cabin 11, I offer a trade. In exchange for my

efforts, you'll do your best to teach me, hand to hand, daggers, sword, shield, and spear. The complete combat-pack."

He was interested, only a fool wouldn't be, but he was also unsure if I could be trusted. "And I even promise not to teach it to Athena's kids." I sweetened the deal. If there was something I could count on, it was the rivalry between Ares and Athena. After all, the first was the god of war; the second was the goddess of strategy and battle. He agreed.

During the following months, I found out two things: one, all Ares kids were healthy in all the shit that regarded combat, hand to hand, sword, spear, dagger. You name it.

And two, James Johnson was a slave driver, and he wasn't as dumb as a rock, which was uncanny, because if I was sure of something, was that the rest of his brothers and sisters shared that sad characteristic. But again, the war was stupid business, so it made sense.

I liked the sword, even if it was boring, and having Luke trash me with it anytime he wished was annoying. The same applied for the spear and Thalia, she just understood it in a way that I couldn't emulate.

In comparison to the spear and shield, daggers were easy, I simply moved my body, knowing that I held something very small and very lethal at the end of my arms.

My hands lacked the powerful grip necessary to be effective in hand to hand combat properly, but it was mostly due to my age than anything else.

I didn't have Hephaestus's skill with metalwork, even if I made myself useful at the forge, slowly picking up the differences between celestial bronze and steel. Basically? Only its magical monster-killer properties. The mind-boggling-ness of the forges was outstanding.

Living at the half-blood camp was, at times, exhilarating and, at times depressingly boring, but always tiring. Which was something I appreciated, signifying that I was learning loads?

Despite all that, I liked the camp. I got used to the morning fog over the beach, even if I steered clear of the ocean, remembering clearly how, at the end of the Iliad, a couple of giant sea-serpents had eaten someone. I got used to the smell of hot strawberry fields in the afternoon, even the weird noises of monsters in the woods at night. I would eat dinner with cabin eleven, scrape part of my meal into the fire, and avoid dumbass activities as best as I could.

Everyone was always looking at Thalia like she was about to eat their souls. Oh, everyone was kowtowing her, sure, even Annabeth, impressionable mortal child that she was, started sitting a bit straighter when Thalia was around. Luke was the only one who treated her with a semblance of normality. Well, I did that too, but it was more because of my natural talent towards disrespect.

19-August 1999

I walked through the woods near the border of the Half-blood camp until I reached the clearing and looked over our carefully selected team. Thalia and Luke were in, of course, David Taylor, a bulky and short fifteen years old son of Hephestus, and Jim Hunter, a very tall sixteen years old son of Hermes.

"Mr. D will skin us alive." Jim was objecting.

"Then you don't know him at all." I cut him off, walking in the clearing.

"Meaning that you do, instead?" Thalia retorted.

"Well, he is your brother, so maybe you know better," Luke smirked.

"Please, don't remind me." She grumbled.

"I'll be calling your father Big D, Thalia, since Mr. D is his son and whatnot." I brought them up to speed with the codename I had chosen for the King of the gods.

"And because of that time when Thalia called him Big Dickhead" Luke clarified, making Thalia blush and bringing us to snicker.

I crouched on the ground: "Okay, okay, short version: Big D seduced and impregnated the beautiful princess of Thebes, Semele, but Big D's wife tricked Semele into demanding that Thalia's pops reveal his true form to her. As a mortal, Semele could not look upon a god's true form without dying. Big D managed to rescue the unborn demigod by sewing him into his thigh. After his birth, he was taken to Silenus."

"Wait, the old satyr? He's senile!" David interrupted.

"It was a shitload of years ago, dumbass." Jim quickly cut him off.

I rolled my eyes: "Once grown, he learned to cultivate grapes and became the first to turn them into wine. He then wandered across Asia, teaching mortals the secrets of winemaking. After his extended vacation, Mr. D ascended Mount Olympus and became the last-arriving of the twelve Olympians.

Since he was the only demigod ever to become an Olympian, because he was raised on the mythical Mount Nysa (which was believed to be either far to the south or the east), and because he wandered Asia before arriving in Greece, he was seen as an outsider. This has always been an inherent part of his cult, which often focused on the more subversive elements of his nature. Mr. D was often called Eleutherios, meaning "the liberator," because his wine, music, and ecstatic dance freed his followers from self-consciousness and the restraints of society. He is the one who constantly crossed the boundary between the civilized and uncivilized and the known and unknown. He is a god of chaos and the protector of misfits."

I finished reporting the tale, seeing that the two Hermes kids we had added to our team were sold.

"Gods, you're such a nerd." Thalia frowned, unleashing laughter.

I pouted, rising from the ground: "Well, everyone knows what to do, Thalia, go play pinochle with Chiron and Mr. D, try to pull an all-nighter, we'll smuggle shit back in just before the crack of dawn."

"I'm the only one who doesn't like the idea of using cabin one as a warehouse for stolen stuff?" David grumbled.

"Hey, I live there and don't have a problem with it, so it's okay," Thalia reassured him.

"Besides, he may be the god of Rightful Law and whatnot, but if he obsessively obeyed it, Sparky would not be here." Luke poked at her sides, causing her to zap him as a retort.

"Why does it have to be me to act as a decoy?" She whined again.

"Because you're so powerful, you'll attract every monster on the east coast," Jim flippantly answered.

"Because Mr. D is your brother?" Luke hopefully added.

"Because you're the strongest and as such, you need to sacrifice yourself for the good of the mission." I nodded sagely.

"You make it sounds like she's going to seduce Mr. D..." David grumbled.

While Thalia was looking at us with a mixture of loathing and disgust, I stage whispered: "Fun-team, let's go!" and set off in the dark. We all had dinner before, so it had been easy sliding away from the crowd in the shared courtyard.

We reached my loyal pickup without problems; I took the driver seat, Luke and Jim took the loading floor while David sat beside me,

lowering the rear window so that we would be able to talk with the other two demigods.

"I still dislike that a 13 years old kid is our driver." the son of Hephaestus said.

"Tough luck, I've been driving longer than anyone else." I defended my position for the four-hundredth time, "And the pickup is mine."

"That only means that you stole it first." He raised an eyebrow at me.

I shrugged, unrepentant: "We'll need to sacrifice part of the loot to Hermes, just to keep him on our good side for the next time."

"That's why we're taking as much shit as we can." Jim soothed us.

I laughed at that. I was reborn in a world where gods were real, and I dragged a bunch of teens into a stealing-expedition into the mundane world.

"Please leave the payment part to me, ok? Don't try and do shit with the Mist." I reminded them.

"You worry too much, RB." Luke soothed me, "We remember, we are on a timer, lots of places to visit."

"RB?" David questioned.

"Regular Bastard, unlike the rest of you, who have been recognized by your divine parent, and as such are Royal Bastards," I explained with a snort.

David frowned a bit: "RB can go for both the titles."

"That's kind of the point, dude." Jim quipped in.

And with that mindless chatter, we had reached the first Supermarket of our list.

For eight hours straight, we followed a precise plan, ticking off items from our shopping list. Boxes of wine, beer, rum, tequila... all kinds of alcohol made its way on the loading floor of the pickup.

Changing malls, we managed to get our hands on an awe-inspiring set of fireworks, even if David rumbled something unintelligible. As a Hephaestus kid, he likely wanted to build them on his own, only because he could.

The 'payment' consisted of me giving the mortal responsible blank pieces of paper along with a bucketload of Mist on his face. There was no need for cloak and dagger with the barest control over the Mist.

Pulling an all-nighter would have tired us, but Ambrosia was better than cocaine, and with fewer side effects too. Well, unless you were talking about overdose, in which case it turned lethal.

The other members of the team had been embarrassed at one of my stops, but I wasn't going to ignore it. I entered a pharmacy and left with no less than 400 rubbers, mark Durex, because I knew some shit was going to happen on the big-ass afterparty planned on the 31st August. Once Dionysus and Chiron were done chewing us out, we could at least point out that we had been responsible.

I didn't care shit if the kids were underage, demigods were naturally sturdier than average, and their livers could survive some drinking. The same reasoning went for sex.

The afterparty was going to be open to 12 years old or older since that was the lower age someone had when sent on a quest (but mostly because Thalia was 12). If Chiron deemed 12 years old responsible enough to risk their lives, then there was nothing forbidding them to have drunk and unsatisfying sex.

The counselors of the cabins were going to keep an eye on the younger ones; at least, I hoped so. The only ones to know something about this were Thalia, Luke, Jim, David, and me. We planned to let

in on the plan the counselors of Dionysus, Hermes, and Apollo. After all, being presented with all the necessary for a more teen-friendly party would deceive them into helping us.

Finding people stealing-friendly outside of Hermes' cabin without giving up the game had been difficult enough, no need to risk it before it was necessary. Luckily, several demigods felt that the less they cared about mortals, the more they would result important to their divine parent.

It wasn't a coincidence that bar Luke, the others were orphans (of their mortal parent at not to attract attention to our tired state; I couldn't care less.

"Tyche, bless us in our endeavors, and I'll find something cool to sacrifice to you." I prayed with a greedy smile on my face once we reached the boundary with the Half-Blood camp.

"Who's that?" Luke asked.

"Our sister." Jim clarified.

"Daughter of Hermes and Aphrodite," David grumbled, adding something not very complimentary of unloyal wives., making the rest of us roll our eyes.

We sneaked through the fog, the dawn giving us enough light to reach cabin 1, where Thalia was waiting. We needed three trips from the pickup to the cabin, the daughter of Zeus busy taking in the stuff we had unceremoniously abandoned on her doorstep.

Each of us spent the rest of the day sleeping whenever we could, doing the bare minimum not to attract attention to our tired state. I knew that I waited the whole time for the other shoe to drop.

It didn't; Lupin III would have been proud and Diabolik as well.

That evening I once again found myself around the giant roaring fire in the shared courtyard.

I was laid on the ground near the fire, hoping that Hestia would take pity on me and come out to chat, when Thalia dropped at my side: "I want a jukebox."

I raised an eyebrow at her.

"I have your entire vinyl stash and no way to listen to it." She explained.

"You do realize that it means granting me access to your cabin anytime I want, yes?" I narrowed my eyes. Like hell, I was going to let her enjoy my music without reaping the benefits.

"I'm already hiding a vast amount of rubbers nobody warned me about." She retorted.

"Hey, those are the only responsible item we took." I justified them, "And the easiest to hide."

"Okay, you can come in whenever you want, deal?" Thalia surrendered.

"I'll see what I can do." I smiled greedily before raising from my position and looking for David.

I dragged the muscular short son of Hephestus where the others couldn't hear us: "If I get my hands on a jukebox, could you tinker with it to add different types of vinyl and maybe some big-ass speakers?"

His dark eyes brightened: "I never get to play with electric equipment as much as I'd like..."

An offer you can refuse

01 September 1999

The first thing I felt was the unsufferable squawking of the seagulls. It echoed in my head, turning the uncomfortable sharpness of simply being aware into a painful ringing.

Fucking seagulls.

Beyond my closed eyelids, I felt the unforgiving light of an uncaring sun. I kept my eyes scrunched close, trying to postpone the inevitable.

In a sudden moment of clear thinking, I dragged my hand...

Sand? Why there's sand under my fingers?

...I dragged my hand over my chest, fumbling blindly until I found my sunglasses, resting on the hem of my shirt.

I spent the following minute into placing them in my face. After that, consciously choosing to ignore my killer headache, I dusted off the sand from my hand before massaging the *hate for being alive* out of my still closed eyes.

In the meantime, under the irregular *brain killing* squawks of the hated birds, I recognized the regular crashing of the waves. *Sea?*

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes by a fraction, gritting my teeth when the light proved itself far too harsh.

I worked on opening my eyes for some time, and when I succeeded, I was met with the sight of an almost cloudless sky, a single, grey nimbus sitting still over me.

Unfortunately, it wasn't shielding me from the sun, which was cheerfully slamming on my fucking face.

With a groan, I forced myself into a seated position, disgusted by the taste in my own mouth. I looked confused at my own feet. I had only a single shoe left, my other bare feet had been drawn upon with a permanent marker. I tilted my head, squinting my eyes: I had no idea as to what the fuck the drawing meant.

I moved my head, *slowly*, taking in my surroundings.

I suddenly remembered I was a demigod in a magic half mythological camp.

Uh, strange the shit you can forget while drunk. I was honestly surprised I had forgotten.

Focusing on understanding what I was seeing, I realized that the crumpled form on my left leg was Thalia, a permanent marker in her hand. Narrowing my eyes and postponing my plots of revenge, I idly scratched my chest, only for my fingers to entangle themselves with something.

I looked down, remembering that the previous evening everybody got his own leather necklace, I looked at the bead for my first summer, the design was pitch black, with a pure white lightning bolt shimmering in the center, Thalia joining the camp had overshadowed every other event. For some reason, there was a cork of wine bottle right beside the black bead.

There were a lot of completely knocked out demigods on the beach. I couldn't be bothered to actually count, but there were... at least more than twenty.

Fucking hell, my head.

I tried to remember what exactly happened the previous night, only getting confusing, blurry flashes of memories bleeding one into

another.

I pocketed Thalia's marker and held her while I slid my leg away from beneath her head. I rose and stumbled towards the sea.

The beach was deceptively big, I had to walk for a couple of hundred meters before reaching it. And when the waves reached my feet, I noticed the unmistakable form of Dionysus at my side.

"Few have the balls to actually call upon me during a party of these dimensions." He spoke.

I grunted, it was too early to deal with a grumpy god. I reluctantly took off my sunglasses and washed my face with the following wave, immediately feeling a lot better. Once I had recovered a bit, I looked at the god.

His usually red-rimmed eyes were bright, his purple irises shining madly in the morning sun.

"You don't look like an alcoholic in withdrawal." I accused him.

Dionysus simply raised an eyebrow, but I could see a grin threatening to break his bored facade.

Then my eyes roamed over the beach, seeing that all the demigods who participated in the previous night's festivities were still out cold. I frowned, linking the dots.

Then I snorted: "You're welcome." Turns out that fifty demigods throwing a big-ass, alcohol-filled party gave quite the bolt to Dionysus.

"There are several rules regarding alcoholic beverages at the camp." A voice said.

I turned to see that Chiron was looking at me with a blank expression. I contained a shiver when the cold seawater licked my feet. It did its job of keeping me awake.

I frowned: "For being an immortal that sends 12 years old on deadly quests, you're surprisingly uptight, has anyone ever told you so?"

"I did, for a matter of fact." Dionysus butted in.

"And you seem to believe this," I gestured vaguely to the still KO demigods "Is somehow my fault."

At their unimpressed stares (even if I believe Dionysus was actually enjoying it) "All the stuff came from cabin 1, if you need to toss someone out of the camp, it's Thalia."

The almost cloudless sky rumbled ominously. I waved mockingly at the clouds: "Truth is often uncomfortable."

Then I turned again towards the two immortals: "Good luck in tossing her out."

The following wave reached my calves, drenching completely my only sock left.

Chiron dug the wet sand with his hoof a couple of times before turning his back and returning to the camp proper: "Mr. D is in charge of the Half-Blood camp, as such he is the one to dispense discipline."

Once he was gone, the short, plump and honestly baffling god spoke: "You seem to think I need proof to toss you out. Or that I need a reason to turn you into a dolphin. I don't."

He was unreadable, however, I highly doubted it, the camp existed mostly to 'train heroes' but they were to be kept out of Olympus politics. Otherwise, with every rivalry the camp would be at war with itself, and gods couldn't just kill or do whatever to children of other gods. Manipulate demigods, sure, plan their demise, why not, but directly acting? Smoke and mirrors to freak out impressionable kids.

I shrugged: The way I see it, either Zeus" the sky rumbled, its ruler not appreciating being called with his name, " calls you back because he thinks you're a bad influence, effectively cutting short your punishment, or he praises you because we strengthened our bonds of friendship and whatnot through a party, which falls under your domain."

The god snorted and leaned forward, his finger tapping the cork on my new necklace, doing *something* I would try to understand later.

"And in any case, I sacrificed a good liter of tequila in your name, so for you, it's a win-win situation." I added.

"That's why I arranged for the younger kids to be busy in the forest." he grinned.

I grimaced at the thought of being awakened by an outraged 7 years old Annabeth. And for the first time, I bowed a little bit. *That* was something I could respect.

"My sons could learn something from this..." Dionysus muttered.

"Why am I the only one awake?" I frowned, the other demigods weren't even stirring.

"Summoning me can have side effects when I grant my blessing on unprepared mortals." the god of ritual madness and wine stated.

I looked at him with a confused expression: "You speak like I am not one."

Dionysus rose an eyebrow 'You're awake, aren't you?' was the clear message.

Oh, no, that shit isn't going to fly. Acting uncharacteristically rashly, I fumbled, reaching into my back pocket at taking out a little switchblade. With a contained grimace, I nicked my left palm, letting

the red, *human*, blood fill my cupped hand. I scrunched my nose, I had cut a bit too deeply.

"I am offended that you believed me a god." and I actually was, James had made me spit blood enough times during training, but I wanted to nip whatever strange idea Dionysus had in the bud.

I flicked my hand on the incoming wave, ridding myself from the pooled blood.

"I didn't say you were a god, I implied you were something different from the common demigod." Dionysus clarified, his eyes following the drops of blood falling in the water.

Then, out of the blue, I felt something. Burning right below my stomach. Churning. Heavy. *Wet?*

I fell on my knees, gasping for breath, my hands plunged in the sand under the seawater, the cut on my palm forgotten.

"One should be careful when offering blood to old Barnacle's beard. Even if in your case it seems to have done some good." The voice of the wine god was drowned by the crushing sound of the waves.

Only, the waves were in my head, echoing my heartbeat. I focused on the crushing feeling, I felt like I was being squashed from the inside. I breathed as slowly as I could, reaching inwards, trying to feel for what was wrong in the same way I tried to *feel* for magic outside.

The origin of it all... I went blindly into myself, until I could feel a warm-cold-undefined center of something. A heat-power-gravity-*something* that started flowing like warm-cool water through my veins. It didn't hurt, it wasn't searing hot, it was just *there*. Like finding again a friend I had forgotten about, and yet different, like finding a new sense I never had before. And yet, I felt somewhat heavier. No, scratch that, tougher... something... There were no words that could properly describe it.

I looked angrily at the ocean before rising from my position, the god of wine had been staring unashamedly at me, as I made for some interesting pet, with the same attention one could dedicate to look at a fly grating its legs one against the other.

"I'm not *his* son, am I?" I whispered, and the sky *thundered* its outrage.

I whipped my head towards the clouds: "Oh, shut up! Thalia is your daughter and we're basically the same age!" I couldn't be bothered to deal with the Head Hypocrite in that moment.

"No, or we would have noticed it, believe me." Dionysus rolled his eyes "You're likely Barnacle's beard's nephew, the son of one of his bastards, no doubt. Offering your blood likely gave him the chance to recognize it."

"So my mother is a goddess, well that narrows it." I distractedly pointed out.

I was busy watching my hands, in particular, the deep cut in my palm, that disappeared only to be replaced by a scar.

"What does this make me?" I wondered.

"Why would you think this changes you?" The diminutive god asked, genuinely not understanding what my point was.

"I'm 3/4 god, 1/4 human." I explained "It is kind of a big deal for me."

Then I frowned: "It doesn't even make sense *why* I cut myself to prove you that I was human, I knew my blood was red."

Dionysus snorted: "Then you can recognize the hand of the Fates when it punches you. Good, it means I have chosen well."

"Chosen what?" I was suddenly very annoyed with the implications of his words.

He pointed at my neck, more exactly, to the cork added to my necklace that he had touched before. I could see a fucking thyrsus on it. Even if it was a cork barely a single inch tall, I could recognize every detail.

It was a straight branch of giant fennel covered with ivy vines and leaves, topped with a pine cone and by a bunch of vine-leaves and grapes or ivy-leaves and berries.

I recalled quickly whatever I could remember about it: the thyrsus, associated with Dionysus and his followers, the Satyrs and Maenads, was a symbol of prosperity, fertility, hedonism, and pleasure.

I'm some kind of fucking priest now, fan-fuckin-tastic." I groaned "Is this why you are being so forthcoming with me now? And not calling me Igor? "

"You called my name during the last night festivities. I gave my blessing." Dionysus *smiled*, making me acutely aware that he wasn't human.

I frowned: "I don't remember calling upon anyone. And was this really the only party that attracted your attention? Besides, it was a one-time thing, shouldn't I be able to refuse whatever this is meant to be?"

The diminutive god chuckled: "It was the only hyped-up party composed only by demigods." he then tilted his head, studying my expression: "Are you even aware of what it means to carry that symbol when it is given from me?"

I shrugged: "No, but I dislike being a slave of whatever kind and..."

"...and you won't be." He interrupted me. "My mark will simply *enhance* what you feel while in a... how do the young say it these days?... Oh yes, a big-ass party."

I crossed my arms, my fingers clenching around the cork: "I don't want to forget the parties I attend to. What would be the point?"

Dionysus actually snorted: "Then drink less, it was not I to turn your brain into mush, boy."

There was some kind of catch, I was sure: "What does it mean for me? And what do you gain from it?"

"I've never been one to make plans." He sighed contently, the breeze ruffling his curls, which were so dark that they had a purple shine to them. "Wearing that cork means very little to you, when you try to convince others to participate in big-ass parties you'll have my blessing to succeed, and I'll get a spark of that energy, nothing that you'll notice or need."

This sounds more and more like the Wabbajack from Skyrim... I realized.

"So, it will make better whatever party I land myself into? No side effects, no strings attached?" I raised an eyebrow, it was such a ...bizarre... yes that was the word, bizarre power to have.

"None" he cheerfully answered.

I still wasn't sold: "What if I don't wish to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh? Will you make a group of women believe I'm a feral beast and have them rip me apart?"

The god threw back his head and laughed, it was savage, cruel, uncaring.

"As amusing as it sounds, I wouldn't, that is ancient history. I acted that way oy because a mortal had the sheer gall to forbid someone to worship me. I don't take choices away from others, I *free* them. It's one of the reasons I am an outsider in Olympus, the others don't appreciate my dislike for plans of whatever kind.

Does this have anything to do with Fate and some kind of lame Prophecy?

The god smiled.

"What if I choose to never have fun again? Just to spite you?"

He shrugged: "Then you're free to do so, the mark will naturally fade with time. I don't particularly care one way or another. I just felt it would be interesting."

"Is it tiring? Actually, explaining shit?" it was exasperating on my end.

"As a god, it's in my nature to be mysterious and to speak in mumbo jumbo. And given the peculiar characteristics of my domain, it goes double for me."

"I'm guessing this chat is a one time deal?"

"I don't lie to those who wear my mark, and more in general, lies are against my nature, they're a product of the more controlling tiers of civilization." he, apparently honestly, answered.

"I don't know you well enough to blindly walk around with your mark hanging from my neck" It made me nervous, it sounded cool, but I only had his word to confirm it.

"Shall I introduce myself then?" he sardonically asked, and for a second I imagined him performing a musical like the Genie in Aladdin. I distractedly wondered if I was already going insane.

"My mother was the mortal Semele, daughter of the founder of Thebes. Zeus's jealous wife, Hera, wanted to know the identity of the child's father. She disguised herself as Semele's old nurse and went to see her. When my mother told her that Zeus was the father, Hera challenged her to prove her claim by having Zeus appear in all his glory. Semele did so. However, the power of the King of the Gods was too much for a human to bear. Semele was turned into ashes."

I was surprised to hear an actual tone of... not sadness, but maybe regret?

"Before my mother died, Zeus pulled me out of her womb. Sewing me into his thigh until I was born, only to be left with my mother's sister Ino, who disguised me as a girl to protect me from Hera. As punishment for helping me, Hera drove Ino and her husband insane."

I grimaced a bit, I hadn't known that part of the story.

"Yes, your little friend had it a lot easier." He nodded in Thalia's direction.

The god scoffed, before shaking his head: "Hera also drove me insane. Thereafter, I wandered the world accompanied by my teacher, Silenus, bands of satyrs, and my women followers."

"The maenads." I added, "The ones who enjoyed raw meat." I scrunched my nose, which wasn't really part of my repertory.

The god nodded: "I always preferred women." he stage-whispered.

"When I reached Egypt, I introduced the cultivation of grapes and the art of winemaking. When I went to Libya, I established an oracle in the desert. I also journeyed to India, conquering all who opposed me. I brought laws, cities, and wine to the country. On my way back to Greece, I met my grandmother, the earth goddess Cybele. She cured me of the madness Hera inflicted me with, the same madness that destroyed my mother's sister, Ino, and her husband. Two mortals that dared protect their family against the queen of the gods." He stared at the waves for a while, and I was unsure as to what to do. Staying still for a couple of years probably would be like the blink of an eye for a god.

Just when I was about to speak, he continued his story: "My grandmother taught me the mysteries of life and resurrection, and after a while, I ended up ascending to my seat in Olympus."

He stopped staring at the ocean and turned towards me, his eyes shining of an eldritch purple fire: "I am both the symbol of creative forces, the lifeblood of nature, and the death that comes after the excess, the liberation of instincts buried too deep to be faced. I was the spark in the heart of the French revolution and the excess of the government of Terror."

He took a step towards me: "Remember this, Icarus. Of all the Olympians, I'm the only one who got to know mortality on his own skin. I don't lie, I don't pretend that the council of the gods is anything more than over-glorified wanking. And I swear in the Styx that everything I told you today is pure, unadulterated truth."

A thunder boomed, rocking the sky.

And he was gone, a faint smell of red wine left behind.

Only then, my headache returned with a vengeance. I watched the unconscious form of Thalia. *Zeus swore on the Styx to not sire children again, and look at her...*

ANNABETH

12 September 1999 There was something wrong, I knew it. I trailed my fingers over the single, black bead on my leather necklace eyeing suspiciously the older campers.

I still don't think Thalia's arrival is so special. I mean, I arrived with her and I'm a daughter of Athena. Luke is the son of Hermes, and in a few months, he proved himself to be the most talented swordsman in the last 300 years...

On the 31st of August something happened, I was sure of it. I stalked in the common courtyard, being careful to keep myself out of sight from *his* position.

He was sitting near the smoldering hearth, apparently talking to himself. And just when I was about to walk towards him and pretend some answers, I spotted a couple of older demigods stopping to talk with the sunglassed freak with mismatched eyes.

I moved closer, one of my older brothers had explained to me that every good plan was based on exact info on the problem that was to be faced. *It's so obvious.* I refrained from scoffing out loud, it would have given my position away.

Just when I was about to be in range, the two older campers walked away, *after bowing lightly to him!*

That made no sense whatsoever. Since their arrival months before, Thalia had been treated with some wariness, Luke with a rightly evergrowing respect for his abilities, and in less than a day, the freak had obtained the same, if not a better, status.

And it irritated me greatly that when I had asked why to Luke or Thalia, they were so oblivious about it. But there was some kind of game afoot, I just knew it. When I had questioned one of the older couples they actually sniggered, *sniggered!* Like there was something funny about it.

A certain David from the Haephestus cabin had actually dared to laugh in my face.

I stomped towards him angrily, I was going to leave with my answers, or I would smash his unsufferable sunglasses in.

He tilted his head towards me when I stopped less than half a meter from him: "That's it! What's going on?"

"Whatever do you mean, Annabeth?" he asked, genuinely confused. *Or at least pretending to be.*

"Something happened at the end of the summer and everyone knows it and is not telling me!" I shouted, putting him in his place.

He hummed, rightly considering that whatever secret he tried to keep had just been blown. I smirked in the safe confines of my head, *I got him.*

"What makes you think something happened?" He dared ask.

"Because everyone older than eleven is wearing a tin cap of beer on his necklace beside the bead of this year." I pointed out, and it was obvious to see.

He hummed again: "Only tin caps?"

I frowned, trying to recall: "Well, no, some had shards from glass bottles..."

"Maybe there's a pattern?" He seriously asked.

"Do not try to distract me with some idiocy, Icarus." I hissed.

He hunched over me: "Do you see any others with a cork?" he whispered.

I narrowed my eyes, looking suspiciously at it: "I'm the only one with it because I have to find out what the others necklaces mean..."

"What about all the people suddenly talking to you?" I asked, if he was trying to trick me...

He shrugged: "Sometimes they drop clues, but honestly?"

He waited for me to nod before going on: "They just poke fun at me most of the time..." he actually sounded a bit sad.

But he suddenly brightened, I thought, it was hard to tell with those sunglasses of his hiding his eyes: "You're pretty smart, aren't you?"

Well, I wouldn't say that... Oh well, I know I am. "I'm a daughter of Athena."

"Then can help me figure this out? Otherwise it will go on and on forever!" He sounded almost desperate, and it wasn't like I didn't want to know...

Then I remembered when he threatened Luke with a couple of kitchen knives.

I took a step back, smiling impishly: "Well, I'd like to, really... just, it would be unfair wouldn't it? It's something that you need to figure out on your own..."

And before my own curiosity pushed me into doing something nice for him, I turned and ran away, briefly glancing over my shoulder ready to enjoy the dismay on his face only to see that he had gone back to speaking to himself.

"He's all kinds of bat-shit crazy..." I muttered before slapping my hands on my mouth and looking around. Grover was nowhere in sight. I sighed in relief, it wouldn't do to curse with that childish goat-kid around after all.

Heritage

17 October 1999

I strolled through the woods, completing my lazy patrol and returning into the clearing where the flag I was to protect was standing.

I sighed, Chiron may have thought that this shit taught me something, but he was quite mistaken.

I would have made myself scarce when all the demigods were called, like I had done every other time, unfortunately, Chiron had caught up with my constant absences and banished me from his healing lessons until I started 'actively participating'.

He was a very knowledgeable centaur, one that had seen the greatest heroes of all time blossom under his tutelage, one that managed to adapt his teaching style to the times we were living in, which was nothing short of astonishing.

He was wise, knowledgeable, and a dangerous fighter. Despite being half horse, he could spot sloppy footwork with the same accuracy he could land an arrow in a fly's ass from a hundred meters. So I wasn't going to ignore his orders, I got that capturing the flag was basically a war simulation, but I wouldn't be leading an army anytime soon, and I had other stuff I would have preferred learning.

For example, since Dionysus' graceful revelation, I had been trying to harness and understand my 'grandson of Poseidon' power. With little to no success, but it was likely because I was trying to do it without a natural body of water, no rivers, no lake, no ocean. I wanted to get to know my power on my own. I was still wary of Dionysus mark, I wasn't eager to master my power or with Poseidon meddling.

Instead, I sat down in the clearing, wrapping myself in several layers of Mist out of habit, bored out of my mind.

Five minutes later, a seven-man team composed of an uneven mix of children of Ares, Hephaestus and Athena came in.

Alarms! Defense breach! I thought, almost laughing out loud.

"They didn't let anyone here as a last line of defense?" a son of Athena asked.

"Obviously not, c'mon, let's get out of here before we're cut off from our lines." the Ares son, who I recognized as one of the goons who tried to bully me the previous year, said.

Soon, the clearing was once more empty. I tilted my head, looking in a specific place in the clearing: the air shimmered, revealing the actual flag.

I smirked: if I had to play, I would make sure to win so badly that nobody would ever want me to participate again.

04 January 2000

Thalia, Luke, and I were in cabin 1, enjoying our relax-time, the jukebox that I had stolen, and modified with David's help, was merrily filling our ears with 'Enter Sandman' by the incomparable Metallica.

The cabin was... white. White marble everywhere, with golden linings on the bunk beds, silks as covers... It was luxury, simple as that. Even more so since I was used to the less than lackluster cabin 11.

"I'm boored" Thalia wined.

I exchanged an eye-roll with Luke, the daughter of Zeus could act incredibly spoiled when in private, and the son of Hermes smirked.

"We could train with the sword." Luke proposed.

"I'd like that, I'm almost your equal, you know." I grinned, while the demigoddess huffed.

"Nobody likes a braggart I-ca-rus." Thalia grumbled, stretching out my name.

"I would feel better if it wasn't actually true, I always had a gift with the sword, and I've been using it for years, you've grown in leaps and bounds." Luke grumbled.

"I'm still bored, we do the same stuff every day." Thalia whined again.

"No, you're feeling the cage, it's different." I retorted.

"So... we're going to NY? I reckon we could manage to sneak into a concert or something." Luke offered.

I shrugged: "I don't mind..."

"Been there, done that. Oh, wait, I love this part!" Thalia jumped up from her bed.

And she started to sing along with a crystalline voice:

~Somethings wrong, shut the light

Heavy thoughts tonight

And they aren't of Snow White~

By then I had joined her:

~Dreams of war, dreams of liars

Dreams of dragon's fire

And of things that will bite

Sleep with one eye open

Gripping your pillow tight!~

Luke rolled his eyes, muttering something about rock obsessed idiots, but he added his voice to the refrain.

~Exit, light

Enter, night

Take my hand

We're off to never-never land~

"Gods Luke, you could kill the Fates with that voice."

"Shut up Thalia!" he tossed her a pillow.

Life was good.

12 February 2000

The sun was shining brightly, the sky was suspiciously cloudless, and the breeze was already dragging with it the first scent of summer.

I had surrendered, getting a handle on my 'nephew of Poseidon'-powers had been impossible. That was why I was standing with the waves hitting my knees on the beach of long island.

I already felt more alive, more aware. My senses were sharper, my body stronger. I felt *free* in a way that even my previous living alone couldn't compare to. I knelt, the almost freezing water felt nicely fresh against my skin. The waves refusing to make me budge, instead they were accepting, almost rooting me in place with their strange embrace.

Logic could only lead me so far. It was obvious, but difficult to accept, that every religion was based on an act of faith.

Faith in what? The gods represented natural and human forces, from Zeus who ruled the Sky, to Aphrodite who ruled over Love itself. I had little doubt that gods were somehow born from human imagination, after all, there were proofs of the Big Bang and of Dinosaurs. The likely, logical conclusion, was that while the universe and humans had begun their existence as the scientists know it, at some point in time things changed. Hopes, dreams, and stories shared around the fire came to life. I hazily remembered about Norse and Egyptian demigods after all. So when somebody asked which origin of the world and which gods were real, the answer would be 'all and none'.

Likely, some what-the-fuck-Force developed along with gravity and strong-weak nuclear force. The what-the-fuck-Force was some kind of magic that turned beliefs and dreams of large numbers of sufficiently complex creatures into reality, and since said beliefs placed a primordial of some kind at the beginning, maybe it worked retroactively.

That realization, however, wasn't freeing me from my conundrum.

I took a deep breath, before exhaling, and started swimming toward the open sea. The current seemed almost eager to bring me out of the safety of the beach, but while I *did mind*, there was nothing to it. An act of faith was my bet.

Soon, I had left the relative safety of the little bay. When I somehow felt the waters were deep enough for what I was thinking, I took a deep breath and dived.

Five meters, ten... the pressure wasn't making me uncomfortable, and while I was slowly letting go of the air, I still had some time before needing a new lungful of it. 20 meters and I was still going. 50meters,

It was clear that I had dived in some crack of the seafloor. I emptied my lungs and remained still, my body being dragged down by gravity. 150meters.

At 200meters of depth, the light dimmed, the water had gone from crystalline to light blue to poisonous green. I was in the twilight zone. And I actually needed to breathe.

My chest was aching, begging me for a breath of fresh air. I dived in my power, feeling it churning under my skin, easing my pain, albeit briefly. I inhaled.

I had scrunched my eyes closed, unwilling to see my surroundings in case it turned out Poseidon refused me.

I had ambrosia in my pocket in case my act of faith didn't work and I needed some pepper up to reach the surface, but the thing is, in a world where myth is just behind the corner, acts of faith are often rewarded.

I breathed in, and I *felt* the sea.

I felt how it weighted on the ocean floor, how the wind rippled against the waves. I felt fifteen dolphins swimming at the border of my senses, a swarm of fishes I could likely identify if I could be bothered, and a curious tiger shark circling me.

I exhaled and inhaled again. My eyes didn't see more clearly, but I knew my surroundings in the same way I knew my body when I closed my eyes.

I watched my hands, marveling at the layer of... air? something?... just above my skin. I poked my forearm, feeling my smooth skin like I was on land.

I opened my arms, throwing my senses across the water, feeling the rocks and the sand, feeling the currents that didn't move me without

my consent, knowing not only the depth I was at but also my position in the sea.

I laughed, the water whirling cheerfully around me. How the hell any of that was happening, I didn't exactly understand, but if there was something that the sea was telling me, it was that sometimes I thought too much.

I gathered it *somehow*, and threw myself to the surface, stopping suddenly short of breaking it, an image of a lightning bolt crashing me in mid-air suddenly flaring in my mind.

Still three meters from the surface, I twirled the water around me, calling forth a current to return to the camp Half-blood. I didn't know how fast I was going... but surely faster than I could run.

I exploded from the water and rolled out my momentum on the beach, I was panting, but I could feel it. The sea, the waves, like a second heart in my gut.

I smiled at the sunny sky, I could work with that.

Roughly a month later, I managed to spot Thalia in the arena, tossing around Ares' children with the sublime combination of spear and shield. It reminded me of Troy: the Achilles versus Hector scene. She handled three older demigods with ease.

She alternated thrusting the spear and using it as a blunt hammer. The first kind of attack made her opponents recoil, the second forced them to hide behind shields, their knees buckling under the impossible strength exercised by the thirteen years old girl.

I felt it again, Poseidon heritage thrumming in my chest. I recognized the air smelling of ozone, and a part of me saw Thalia as... *enemy*.

The sane part of my mind found fascinating the idea of rivalry among gods bleeding over to their mortal offspring. *And grandfather*

Poseidon's enmities reach even me... I snorted at the monicker I had given to the Stormbringer, arguably one of the most terrifying gods out there.

Does this mean that their power is tied to their identity? And both to their blood? I wondered.

The more I realized about the world I was in, the more fascinating the questions became. I wasn't going to pull an Orochimaru and start experimenting on demigods, but I could see the appeal.

I was watching Thalia intently, *feeling* her power spiking occasionally. It wasn't an aura, nor the occasional smell of ozone, but there was a sense of... *foreboding*. Like the sky was about to fall on you, and *somehow* said feel could be tracked back to Thalia.

I wondered how nobody else seemed to notice. *Maybe it is my being 75% god?* I wondered.

I scoffed. If godhood followed Mendel's laws, regular demigods should have a mutant mesh of blood and ichor, and the same went for me, even if with a different ratio.

No, the distance between gods and men wasn't something that could be measured with numbers. And yet demigods survived ambrosia and nectar, where it would have killed a regular human.

That was without talking about the magical mumbo jumbo that was the demigods' powers over their godly parent' domain.

Maybe... a god is its domain. I speculated. Thalia had gone along the planned thieving for the previous end of summer party, in the same way, Zeus broke his word on not having children. Yet, the king of the gods also ruled over The Rightful Law, of something like that.

Did his adherence to the sacrality of the law wane along with humanity growing loss of moral values? After all, the higher one

climbed on the mortals' social ladder, the more exposed he became to compromise and bribery.

But again, I wasn't so naïve as to believe corruption, rape, and whatnot didn't exist during Agamemnon's rule. *Still, morality is a matter of perception, and law its reflection. I think immortality has its own way to completely skewer whatever moral compass one has, didn't Athena the Wise turn Arachne into a spider only because the mortal won their little bet?*

What about the other religions? I wondered. I was reasonably sure the author of the fantasy world I was in had squeezed all the money he could from the franchise, bringing in Egyptian and Norse gods and demigods as well.

I frowned, noticing my memories of my past lives becoming hazier the longer I lived in this reality.

It was unsettling. But for the life of mine, I couldn't figure out how to put a stop to it. In the Greek pantheon, every life was guided by the Fates. Each role revealed by her very name: Clotho spun the thread of life, Lachesis measured its allotted length, and Atropos cut it off with her shears. Sometimes, each of the Fates was assigned to a specific time: Atropos the past, Clotho the present, and Lachesis the future. Arguably, Clotho plucked my soul previous life and with Lachesis she spun me into this reality.

Where does free will fall into all of this...? Was I there to do her bidding? But no, Fate found a way to resolve itself anyway. Did that mean someone else cashed in an I Owe You from them? But who could hope to strongarm the Fates?

From what I knew, they were fatherless daughters of Nyx herself, a fucking primordial. And she wasn't the ruler of the night, in the same way, Uranus wasn't the ruler of the sky. Nyx was the night.

And something more. In ancient times, before men managed to tame fire, the night was full of terrors, it was the unknown, the not-

understandable, the endless mystery.

Nyx was a daughter of Chaos, her nature defied definition, I doubt that she owed anything to anyone, or needed to concern herself with a little demigod among mortals.

Yet, there was an inky darkness in the hut where I grew up. I remembered.

I shook my head, looking again in the arena. I grinned when I noticed Thalia had found another soon-to-be-sorry group of demigods to spar against.

I didn't know if my parentage would make me more powerful than the daughter of Zeus. I knew that the growth of my skills wasn't normal, even for a demigod, but power itself wasn't easily defined.

I remembered with absolute clarity 'my sister' 's lessons: Magic is based on intent, like every other action performed by sentient creatures'.

"I'm starting to believe that my sister was my godly mother in disguise..." I muttered, before pushing away that thought. It would have explained why I had never thought to question her. *Hell, I don't even know her name.*

Intent, intent... I mused silently, returning to a more interesting problem.

It made some kind of sense, after all, I hardly believed that Poseidon used magic words to raise the tide. Hell, I knew the moon was mostly responsible for it.

I was a firm believer that knowledge was power, and that knowledge didn't exist without understanding. I while magically understanding something meant that somehow I need to know it through my gut. I knew all kinds of facts about everything, tides and waves, coral

reefs, and whatnot. My act of faith, I believed, had granted me some understanding over the sea.

I knew that stuff didn't happen only because of 'magic'. Physics *is real goddamn it!* I frowned. Gods were personifications of the natural forces birthed by the human mind. The different genesis of the world second each religion crashed horribly against each other.

I sighed. *Thoughts for another time.*

I hopped into the arena and grabbed a training gladius from the rack. The blade itself was fifty centimeters long, the blunted edge shining under the sun. The handle was wrapped with leather, and I gave a pair of swings, it was a bit unbalanced towards the blade. But that only meant that I would be using it more as a hammer than anything else.

"Thalia, do you ever wish to actually *hit* something without holding back?"

She looked at me, an almost wistful smile on her face: "Yeah... but I don't want to kill half of the demigods by mistake."

I called forth my power. Seeing through and manipulating the Mist was delicate, soft. Instead, the kind of magic mumbo jumbo I had inherited from Poseidon was anything but.

It was uncaring, untameable, *heavy*. It wasn't a magic core, it wasn't some abstract reserve of energy. It was, simply put, my will. My willingness to crush, my acceptance of collateral damage, my uncaringness about the consequences.

The air went from smelling of ozone to feeling like a sea breeze, water nebulized around me, evaporating briefly, and leaving a salt layer on my skin before getting wet again.

Exhilarating didn't even begin to cover it. I swung distractedly my borrowed blade, it *blurred* through the air, light as a walking cane.

I tied it to my belt and picked up a spear from another rack. I was fourteen, I was 1,63 meters tall, the weapon was easily 2,50 meters long.

With my right hand tightly wrapped around the spear, I pressed down, almost embedding its head in the ground, before kicking with all my strength, *snapping* the ash wood exactly where I wanted it to break.

I whirled my two meters, long staff, around me, letting my body get used to its feel and balance.

I saw Thalia's eyes widening and her mouth opening in a little, surprised 'o', before her usually cobalt blue irises turned more... *electric*, with grey streaks promising a thunderstorm. She looked at me not understanding what had just changed.

She knew me, I was easy going and laid back, albeit devious when necessary. And yet, in the same way, I had felt her 'presence' change before, she now *felt* me. *Foreboding*.

She licked her lips, that curled up showing just too many teeth for it to be a smile.

"I promise I can take it." I muttered. I was looking at her like a hungry wolf would look at a scared rabbit, and she was doing the same.

Never one to wait, Thalia charged forward, fainting hopping from one foot to the other, trying to unbalance me.

She lunged with the spear, aiming at my chest, I tilted in my right, my feet at shoulder width and my knees half bent. At the same time, I retaliated lunging with my staff, held in my right hand.

It impacted soundly against Thalia's copy of the Aegis, bulls eyeing Medusa's forehead.

My left hand clamped on Thalia's spear and I completed my twirl leveraging on my right foot, pulling her as strong as I could.

While I succeeded in unbalancing her, she jumped forward and slammed her shield on my back, or at least tried to.

I flattened my self against the ground and added momentum to my spin, my left leg swiping the ground and the back of her calves just when she had managed to regain her balance.

She tumbled on the ground, bringing down her shield like it was a cleaver. I immediately jumped back, demigod or not, being struck with the edge of her shield would have fractured my tibia.

I was grinning madly, and Thalia had the same expression. I was hopping on my feet, I was thriving in our friendly conflict.

21 March 2000

"They won't grant us a quest." Luke rolled his eyes, "You must know that."

"Well, I never said anything about asking for permission." I shrugged.

Thalia grinned at my answer: "Do you have something in mind? At least something that won't get us flayed alive once we return?"

Luke and I looked at her with raised eyebrows.

She huffed: "Okay, something that won't get *you two* flayed alive as punishment and me without dessert for a month?"

It had been hard, but Luke and I had managed to point out to Thalia that whatever happened, the fucking King of the Gods was keeping an eye out for her.

That had been... an interesting conversation.

"There is a statue of Tyche. In a museum in Istanbul, I believe..." I returned on track, "She's the goddess of luck, more or less."

Luke snorted: "You want to cross the world to steal a statue?"

I arched an eyebrow, as I were to say 'what of it?'

"I'm in!" Thalia almost started dancing in joy at the prospect of leaving the camp.

"We'll need a plane..." I reminded her.

She paled. "Thinking about it, I'm perfectly fine with staying at the camp."

I snorted. She still was scared of heights, it was hilarious.

On the following night, around 3 am, I had entered the woods armed only with a sword and bullheadedness. My grandfather was Poseidon, my father some nameless demigod (who I thanked for the blood that granted me access to one of the most powerful domains) who had likely been seduced into the Lotus casino by my mother.

My mother. Chance didn't exist, my soul came from another world, I was sure, after all, I had years of (albeit fuzzy) memories even when I was five. A brain of a five years old isn't wired to understand abstract thought. So somehow memories were tied to my soul.

Which made sense, since people kept living in the underworld. I distractedly ducked under a branch and kept walking, taking notice of the occasional creepy noise coming from around me. I knew there were monsters in the forest, but my control over the Mist was so tight that it managed to trick even them.

None of the fates could be my mother, Nyx was out of the question. Which female immortal could manage something like that?

Then it hit me. *I'm a fucking idiot.*

I grew up with a fucking witch that taught me the basis of magic.
Hecate.

The goddess of magic, witchcraft, the night, crossroads, moon, ghosts, and necromancy. She was the only child of the Titanes Perses and Asteria from whom she received her power over heaven, earth, and sea.

Who else could pull a soul from another reality only for shit and giggles?

"Hecate, the one who works from afar..." I muttered, still walking across the woods "Wasn't she a virgin goddess?" I frowned, then I remembered that Athena was one too.

But what did it mean? *Let's think about my grandparents on my mother's side.*

Perses was a Titan, son of the Titans Crius and Eurybia. He represented destruction and peace. My grandmother would be Asteria, another Titan, daughter of the Titans Coeus and Phoebe and sister of Leto. Asteria was the Titan who ruled over nocturnal oracles and shooting stars. *Bizarre fields to work in.*

I entered a large, oval-shaped clearing, the trees parting enough to let me see the sky without interruption. The full moon looked far closer than it should have.

It made so much sense! Magic itself was difficult to define, and it wasn't clear if it had any limit, after all, Circe turned people into pigs all the time.

Necromancy? I was almost sure I had died before.

I still didn't receive strange vibes from the moon, but... I stopped my furious train of thought and simply *stared* at a sudden flickering light among the trees. Weaving her way among the trunks, a woman

walked towards me, a torch holding a silvery fire held high above her head.

I shut down my urge to snort. *Typical godly-drama-queen.*

She stopped in front of me, a mocking smile on her thin lips. She was wearing casual trekking clothes. Boots and black cargo pants, a grey t-shirt under a leather jacket, there was a thick, bronze-looking key tied to her belt.

She had pitch-black, shoulder-length hair which moved in waves, a large forehead, and a straight nose. Her irises were of a smoke-ish dark gray, with the occasional silver spark in it, the same as my right eye.

"Hecate." I narrowed my eyes: "goddess of magic, witchcraft, night, crossroads, moon, ghosts and necromancy."

Her smirk widened when I took what I hoped was a threatening step forward: "*What have you done?*"

If she was shocked by my open hostility, she didn't show it: "A masterpiece." she grinned, and the way she was looking at me made clear that she was referring to me.

"Why would you bring me here?" I insisted I wanted to know if there was some price to pay for living the life of a demigod in a fanfiction universe.

"I don't rule over crossroads as much as I rule over *choice*, which is easily represented by crossroads, it's another reason why mortals often described me as three-faced." she answered.

"I didn't choose this." I countered.

"Didn't you? Perhaps, but in any case, the dead can hardly choose, can they?" she grinned some more, "Even if I admit it, I took you

because you were *always* choosing. I wanted to see for myself the kind of change your *choices* would bring here."

I frowned, there was something... I couldn't remember.

"What do you want? What do you gain from my existence?" I pressed her.

"At the very least, I can see how you stumble your way through magic, I'll get a laugh out of it." Her smile turned devious.

I narrowed my eyes. *I will learn magic, because it's cool, not because of you.*

I would have loved to have a brilliant comeback, but she kept referring to my choices... choices I didn't remember.

Ok, how do I take back my memories?

Titan's fear

12 march 2000

Fighting against Thalia was strange.

I knew it, she knew it, but I could never exactly point my finger on it.

I had taken lessons from the children of Ares in my first months at the camp, but the more we fought, the less *their* way of fighting stuck with me.

Ares children were fearsome warriors, that was for sure, their maneuvers, techniques, and moves were well polished and part of a bigger picture. When I forced myself, I could even copy some of them.

Otherwise, in a semi-serious fight, like the one I was having with Thalia, their teachings tended to slide off me, leaving me with only my gut as a guide.

Instead of worsening my performance, I became much *...more*.

Faster, stronger, less predictable. And Thalia was the same.

I had left behind staff, spear, shield, and sword, even if I was competent in the use of each one, to take up twin hatchets in their stead.

My movements were wide, a surge of unrelenting attack and a deep breath in retreat, bringing myself into her guard and then out of her reach.

Over her shield and behind her, like a waver rolling over a rock.

The blades of my one-handed axes were describing circular patterns in the air, from time to time, I used the wood of the handles as a

hammer against Thalia's shield.

Suddenly, I understood what was happening. My movements recalled the sea, the rhythm mimicking the up and down of the waves, alternating times in which I kept attacking to periods during which I stood on the defensive.

In that, I behaved like the tides.

But during my attack-phase, oh it was glorious.

My right hand slid upwards on the wooden handle, bringing my knuckles under the blade of the bearded axe, and I punched in an upward swing the tip of Thalia's spear, which sizzled less than three centimeters from my head, the wind rushing around it and pushing me back.

I rolled with it, twisting my torso as I let the momentum make my left hand slid down the handle of my other weapon, increasing my range and the strength of its impact against Thalia's raised shield.

A low boom resonated in the arena as the demigoddess was forced to stumble and I brought both my arms together, adjusting my grip on my chosen weapons and spinning on myself, bringing them again against her shield.

Thalia lowered her barycenter and tanked the blow from behind her shield, her spear skyrocketing against my shoulder from behind her defense.

Her head was hidden, meaning that it was a blind blow, and nonetheless, it was accurate.

I twisted once more, letting the wind brought with her spear guide my momentum, only to fall back when she charged me with her shield.

She pushed with the strength of a blizzard, my right bearded axe bit the edge of her shield and I pulled her in, guiding her momentum

and essentially swapping our places.

Where on large scale my movements resembled either the sea during a storm or a whirlpool, the swiftness through which I avoided blows akin to a small torrent coursing through rocks, Thalia's style switched between lightning fast strikes and the unrelenting pressure of a gale, while the air lightly slapped most of my blows off course. It was a subtle, subconscious thing, the air naturally coursing to counter my movements and to help hers.

I didn't mind, it kept me on a high, and forced me to adapt constantly to her movements.

We were deadly, fast, strong... *powerful*. I could imagine why the gods would be nervous about our existence.

Why am I so much aware of how she is using her power but she doesn't even realize it? I wondered.

"Let's... stop... for today." I panted after having delivered a powerful kick to her midriff, gaining myself some much-needed room to breathe.

"Why?... Are... You..." She didn't even have the breath to finish her taunt.

I hobbled toward the water bottles neatly stacked on one side of the arena and downing one over my head, feeling my sore muscles stop aching and my breath slowing down. *Water healing magic powers are totally a cheat code.*

Muscles tore down under great effort and regrew stronger than before after some time. Water in any shape or form let me completely bypass the 'time' factor.

Maybe I can feel how much the god in me affects my development because Hekate rules over magic. I speculated, before returning my

attention to Thalia, who was downing her own bottle of water, her eyes closed in bliss and her chest heaving quickly.

My eyes stayed glued to her form for a couple of seconds more than strictly necessary, before sweeping over the other demigods in the arena or on the stands.

At 14 years old, Thalia had tackled puberty with determination, and as a fifteen years old male, it mattered little if I was a reincarnation or not, I stared.

The other demigods did the same, even if maybe they were still awed by our mock-duels, given the amount of attention I was receiving from both sexes.

"Too tired to continue, then?" her voice made me turn towards her.

I snorted: "Hardly, but I have to check in with David, we have a couple of projects going on..."

I eyed the two hatchets I had been using for the past month with a mixture of dissatisfaction and mistrust. They worked for me, but in the same measure, I could make everything work whenever I fought following my gut.

I had gotten better at it, at the point where I could almost foretell my next moves, and I was slowly forcing myself to incorporate kicks in my repertoire. For whatever reason, if I were to follow only my instincts, I would use my foot only to stomp over something.

"You can admit it, you know." Luke quipped from behind me.

FUCK YOU LUKE! I pretended that he didn't startle me with his sudden appearance: "Thalia clicks with shield and spear, you click with the sword, I'm looking for a weapon that *clicks*." I answered scrunching lightly my nose.

"Well, you've become dangerous with those things." Thalia conceded
"You caught me flat-footed when you used one as brass knuckles."

I grinned at that: "They are versatile aren't they?"

"They're made to chop wood." Luke deadpanned.

"And they can chop arms just as easily." I overruled his objection, turning one upside down and trying to discern how it would work as a baton.

I started walking away without looking back, considering what kind of weapon would work better for me.

"I still don't know why he can't use a sword. Or two slightly shorter ones, a sword is perfect. It's *the* white weapon by definition, you know." I heard Luke protest behind my back.

I could imagine Thalia rolling her eyes at his well-practiced rant in defense of his favorite weapon while I made my way through the camp towards the Haephestus' cabin's backyard. Which was a cross between a giant warehouse and a blacksmith wet dream. Forge, workbench, whetstones, engines half-broken apart, half turned in something else with animal-like features.

I dropped the two hatchets in a shed near the woods and walked to the workbench number 8, where a familiar demigod was hunched down, scribbling madly with a pencil over a nondescript piece of wood.

"You know that writing on paper is much easier, yes?" I introduced my presence while plopping down on an empty crate that I turned upside down.

The man rolled his eyes and dropped what he was doing after a couple of minutes that I spent watching him intently in complete silence.

"You do realize how unnerving it is having someone with mismatched eyes stare at you in complete silence, yes?" he snarked while rummaging through a pile of *something* behind the workbench.

I smiled earnestly at David, son of Hephaestus, when he slid to me what I had stolen, bargained and traded for.

I forgot to comment on his snark, busy as I was with taking in the box I helped design and create.

"Does it work?" I asked, carefully sliding my fingers over it.

The box was in celestial bronze, of a rectangular shape, 70x25x15 centimeters, and was covered in greek letters which could slide on several tracks, their inner workings beyond what anyone could discern with a simple look.

"Obviously, I finished the tests yesterday, it won't break, nor it will run out of power." David answered "It's a pity we cannot market it with the mortals, otherwise we would be settled, but I have to admit that whatever shit you did with the runes made all the difference in the world."

"And about the *other* project?" I asked, distractedly trailing my hands over the beads and corks of my necklace.

"I just got started, it will take time to find the right materials and for the testing, but I like your designs." He grumbled as an answer.

"Is this... is this *respect*?" I asked, mocking his uncharacteristically serious tone.

When he tossed at me a scrap of bronze, I knew I had already overstayed my welcome, and hightailed out of their backyard.

I walked to the edge of the woods, and at a three-way crossroad where the paths lead respectively to the cabins, the arena and the strawberry fields, I took the fourth road.

Not that anyone would have noticed it.

Crossroads may have been a mere symbol of free choice, but they still fell under my mother's domain, and that put them squarely under my thrall.

I walked slowly for twenty minutes, checking on the multitude of layers of mist that I had spun among the ash trees that lined the path, and occasionally undoing one that was unraveling only to place another one in its place.

I quickened my pace when I heard the waves, and after a couple of minutes, I reached my abode.

It was a lucky place on the coastline, the uncharacteristically rocky beach held enough dirt to allow trees to thrive.

Thrive was maybe too big of a word, but they managed to survive well enough, even if they couldn't compare to the titans of my native forest.

I walked down toward the sea, rounding on a big ass rock and reaching the secluded spot where I had built my home, only a few meters above sea level.

Again, 'home' may have been a bit of a stretch: my tent was pitched against one of the big rocks that stood tall in a semicircle, shielding me from both wind and sight.

I ducked in and dropped the contraption I had retrieved from David, before picking up a two-handed axe that somehow had made its way into my hands and a low pile of stainless pipes held together by strips of leather.

I made my way back into the forest, walking slightly uphill until I found a creek.

Once I was there, I started using the head of the celestial bronze axe to draw an almost perfectly straight line back to my home.

For four hours, I put to work every ounce of energy my body was capable of setting up a course for the pipes to follow.

The pipeline was one hundred and twelve meters long, and the water fell in a trickle over a side of my secluded place, like a bad imitation of a waterfall that somehow had managed to be pitied enough by the gods to be allowed to exist.

In that way, my home had potable water. It was cold, and the flow was a joke, but it was more than I had had in the morning, so I couldn't complain.

Looking with a grimace to my axe, I walked back into the forest, looking for the trees that I would need to build my... well, I had little hope that it would ever turn out as anything different from a hut.

10 July 2000

"Run that by me again." I repeated.

We were all sitting around on one of the free beds of cabin one, the loyal jukebox playing quietly Cherry Pie by the Warrant.

~ She's my cherry pie

Cool drink of water, such a sweet surprise

Tastes so good, makes a grown man cry

Sweet Cherry Pie, yeah ~

"I met with my father." Luke repeated.

"I think he got that Luke." Thalia stage whispered, trying to joke. A pity I wasn't feeling like it.

"I don't, actually. Not really." I retorted, gaining two surprised glances from the other two demigods.

"We had stolen shit before, Hades, we also did some awesome stuff with it!" I cursed.

"Remember the car racing?" Luke grinned to Thalia.

She turned her enthusiasm for the fond memory into a very likable virtuosic over the song:

~ If I think about baseball, I'll swing all night, yeah

Yeah, yeah

Swingin' in the living room, swingin' in the kitchen

Most folks don't 'cause they're too busy bitchin' ~

"Yeah like the totally illegal, underage car racing in long island." I nodded, remembering the crazy night with a smile. *Gotta love the super reflexes that half godhood grants.*

"But focus." I repeated, snapping my fingers: "Gods don't appear out of the blue on their own, we all know that. So either he wanted something, or more likely, you called him."

Luke grimaced a bit at my bitter tone, we both ignored Thalia's blush along with her trilling:

~ Swingin' in there 'cause she wanted me to feed her

So I mixed up the batter and she licked the beater

I scream, you scream, we all scream for her

Don't even try 'cause you can't ignore her

She's my cherry pie

Cool drink of water, such a sweet surprise ~

And we both willfully the double entendre with Thalia as a protagonist that naturally jumped to mind, the heaviness of the topic enough to ground us.

"Yeah, I ... kinda asked for a quest." He admitted.

And that stopped even the blushing Thalia, bringing a cute frown on her forehead: "You didn't tell us that part."

She still had a less than meaningful relationship with Zeus, and the idea of asking for something, or even worst, to cater to the whims of her father didn't hold any kind of appeal.

Luke grimaced: "Listen, not everybody is happy like you two. Thalia, you have this cabin for yourself and don't have to prove anything to anyone. Icarus, you somehow managed to find a house for yourself, don't think that nobody in the cabin noticed, and no offense but you don't fucking care about anything beyond me, Thalia and whatever shit you're building with David."

I frowned heavily and made to object when he went on: "For whatever reason, you refused to come to visit the Olympus on the winter solstice, and still you somehow got blessed by Mr. D, which sounds bad, but it means that the at least one god acknowledged you, I am not that lucky, okay? I got dropped and forgotten in my father's cabin along with forty other demigods!"

"Wow, Woah, slow down." I waved my hands in front of me in what I hoped was a placating gesture: "First of all Mr. D. didn't bless me, he likes me because I manage to get him drunk once a year without breaking the rules of his punishment, second, I'll stay as far from the gods as I can, thank you very much."

After the thunder from outside and the snicker from Thalia had died down, I went on: "And... forgotten? Really? Half of the camp looks up to you, you're the most capable swordman since *forever*, and..."

"Spare me." He cut my objection "That's not the point."

"It kind of is..." Thalia objected: "Why do you feel we forgot you? Why do you feel like you need... dunno, more? And why asking a god? That just... it doesn't make sense!"

He grumbled something unintelligible before jumping down the bed and starting pacing, his arms straight down his sides and his hands opening and closing, like he was looking for something to strangle.

"It doesn't matter." He refused to answer.

Ah, teen angst, the great constant across the multiverse. My fingers drew small circles on my temples, and I took a breath to calm down.

Why does a random teen go all antsy-angsty without a reason? Oh yes, for problems that usually don't exist... They unleash random insecurity and the need to boast to overcome it, jealousy over nothing, fear of rejection, questioning self-worth when the truth is that nobody cares... I listed off in my head.

~ Tastes so good, make a grown man cry

Sweet cherry pie, oh yeah

She's my cherry pie

Put a smile on your face, ten miles wide

Looks so good, bring a tear to your eye

Sweet cherry pie, yeah ~

"The point is that I got to steal a golden apple, and the Oracle said to go with only one companion, I asked Thalia, I leave in a week." Once that he had said his piece, he turned his back and bolted out of Cabin 1.

The revelation hit me like a mace: "He's jealous."

"What?" Thalia frowned.

I looked at the demigoddess and back to the now-closed door of Zeus' cabin.

"You're Zeus' child, I'm the son of nobody, I share his cabin and managed to distinguish myself throwing parties and organizing unofficial quests to bring stuff to the camp..." I reasoned.

"He's extraordinary with a sword, but we're both more powerful, if we actually let loose we could snap him like a twig." She frowned and followed my thoughts.

"You have spent a lot of time together before meeting me, relying on each other, and protecting Annabeth. Then since we came to the camp, you and I have spent more and more time together, either to train or to sing or whatnot." I concluded.

She snorted: "It would make sense, but Luke isn't like that."

"Isn't he?" I retorted: "Traditionally the quests go by teams of three, you and I are the most powerful demigods this place has seen in many years, and he asks only you?"

Thalia grimaced, distractedly biting her lower lip, and she fidgeted in her seated position.

"Shit!" She cursed and hopped down from the bed, pacing just like Luke did, only with her arms crossed and shooting me glance after a glance, only to shook her head and mutter stuff too quietly for me to hear.

"Jealous." She repeated.

Then she shook her head violently, her hair whipping against her flushed cheeks.

I rose from my seated position and walked over to her, tilting my head questioningly. I didn't say anything, she clearly had some kind

of epiphany, to either reveal it or mull it over was her choice.

The fates know that I keep most of my thoughts to myself. I thought.

"I'll go with him." She told me.

Not that I doubted it, but it was clear that her thoughts had been rolling in a completely different direction.

The questions burned on my lips but I held them back.

You know what he is jealous about. Tell me.

"It was obvious." I deadpanned.

There is something wrong. Tell me.

"I'll leave you to your preparations then?"

She shook her head lightly before answering: "Yeah, it would be for the best."

I squeezed her shoulder and left the cabin: "If you want to talk, I'm game, you know?" I tossed over my shoulder.

There was something wrong in her reaction, but I couldn't read her mind, nor I was eager to spend more effort than strictly necessary dealing with whatever trouble had just come up, so I made my way to the beach where us, the 'over 12 years old demigods, held our parties at the end of the summer.

It was almost time for the sun to drop below the horizon, my shadow stretched long on the ground, climbing over the little mounds of sand and dropping in the small holes left by seagulls in search of crabs and other potential food.

I left the constant swaying of the waves to soothe me, but still, I was perturbed, and not by Luke' mission, I remembered he had something to do near Mount Otri, but there was something... in the

way Luke and Thalia had behaved, but also in the way they had looked at me, the son of Hermes like I had hurt him, and Thalia had suddenly discovered shyness.

I dropped on the sand, looking at the cloudy sky, trying to find a reason behind their strange actions.

After a while, something dropped on the side of my head, startling me and tossing grain of sand over my face.

I shot forward spluttering and staring confused at the leather canteen that had almost landed on my head, before raising my eyebrows toward the offender who had tossed it.

I did not expect him to be Dionysus.

"Well?" I asked.

"Beer dulls a memory, brand sets it burning, but wine is the best for a sore heart's yearning." The plump god answered.

"What?" was my eloquent answer.

"I've been standing here for several minutes already, and you didn't notice. I hardly need to be a god to notice something is troubling you." The god of ritual madness quietly replied.

I grabbed the canteen and uncorked the top, sniffing at its contents: "Should I be surprised that your help comes in an alcoholic guise?"

"In my experience, there are two kinds of problems that can weigh down both immortals and mortals." the god sighed.

"The problems that one *can* solve, and those that one *can't*. Drinking over the latter offer lends a new perspective and makes them fall under the first category."

I blinked, confused: "I wasn't aware I had any problems."

After a second, I amended my answer: "Well, I don't know if its a problem or not, I just don't understand fully what's happening, that is all."

"That places the situation squarely under the second category." The little god laughed delighted: "Knock yourself out with that wine, the canteen will remain full until the end of the month."

My eyebrows skyrocketed, already thinking about how many barrels I could fill before selling them back to the other demigods when Dionisus stopped me:

"And don't bother trying to pour the wine anywhere but in a thirsty mouth, it won't work in that case."

Party pooper god. I insulted him in the safe confines of my mind.

"I wouldn't have dreamt of it." I deadpanned out loud.

15 July 2000

I had chosen the rail-road, not that I feared Zeus, but it was obvious that we didn't like each other, and as such, I wanted to avoid crossing his domain without a damn good reason.

From New York to San Francisco it took me 3 days and a half.

A couple of runes on my carriage and I was left alone. No monsters and no people. It had been... quiet, but after years among other kids, I enjoyed my break, music from the magic-jukebox built-in celestial bronze and wine, along with snacks of various kind. It had been oddly relaxing.

I thanked the mortal and paid with a handful of Mist, before walking towards a plaque.

Mount Tamalpais was protected within public lands such as Mount Tamalpais State Park. It didn't look extremely impressive, and yet, to my sixth sense, it *roared*. With the side of my eye, I almost saw the clouds swirling in a column around the top.

I sighed and entered the park. I could understand why demigods wanted to go on quests, randomly exploring a place that held the chance of hiding a good battle was thrilling, even if I was wary of facing the promise of a horrible death that was Ladon.

Then I remembered, we wanted to enter the Esperids' garden, and Ladon only purpose was to keep guard on the tree of golden apples.

The beast, as well as my target, was likely in the middle of the garden. *Now, how to know where to go?*

I spent the following hours crossing the garden, looking behind every trunk, among every bush, all without success.

I shook my head, there was magic in the air, and a powerful one, that was unmistakable. And yet I felt there was something just behind the corner of my eyes, not a veil, only... something. It wasn't Mist, I could easily recognize it, but... I couldn't define it, I felt like being on the edge between oil poured over water, but that wasn't quite it.

I sighed, and looked once more to the overbearing mountain: "When in doubt, ask?" I wondered, looking at the Mount Tamalpais, which clearly had a second full-time job as the reincarnation of mount Otri.

I trekked at a leisurely pace, I had rations in my sack, water, and nobody was running after me.

After thick layers of Mist that gave my talent in manipulating it a run for my money, I reached the top of the mountain. There were ruins, blocks of black granite and marble as big as houses. Broken columns. Statues of bronze that looked as though they'd been half-melted. I whistled slowly, wrapping the Mist tighter around me. It was a dreary place.

A few dozen of meters ahead of me, gray clouds swirled in a heavy vortex, making a funnel cloud that almost touched the mountaintop, but instead rested on the shoulders of a man.

I had found out that Immortals were difficult to recognize unless they wanted to, however, there was no possible way to mistake Atlas.

In the middle of the small plateau, he had one knee rammed into the ground, which, surprisingly enough, didn't have a single fissure or crack, and yet few grains of sands seemed to climb one over the other, only to keep falling.

The titan's visible foot was twitching occasionally, minutely shifting the balance of the world's roof.

He had a single loincloth hiding his genitalia, leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination. He was bulky, not only that, he was chiseled, every single muscle contracting occasionally, his broad shoulders where something else, I could almost *feel* the unrelenting strength he was exercising.

"Who's there?" His voice rumbled, it was deep and overwhelming.
Titan is too little a word to describe him...

I couldn't tell, but he was likely taller than 2 meters, his black curly hair was cut short and, since he was bent forward, they formed a curtain that hid his face.

I was thinking about how to ask him how to enter the Hesperids' garden, but nobody did anything for nothing. And I had honestly no idea what he could want.

When in doubt...

I let the Mist surrounding me fall apart, letting the being who was holding the sky to see me.

Immediately, the Titan rose his head, his eyes pinning me where I stood. He had regal features, a cross between elegant and sharp, which gifted him an aura of command that *tried* to ensnare me. His eyes were pitch black, no white, with occasional grey streaks flashing through.

I sat where I was, not trusting myself in going closer. I was sitting where the Sky wanted to shag the Earth, with a Titan in a loincloth stopping the two from obliterating the continent.

Why? Not only because I could, but most of all because I had been told I must stay away from another hero's quest. Like stealing shit for someone else was important, and like I did care about the gods' opinion about me.

I am a free man! I thought fiercely.

So... how to force an immortal titan able to hold back two primordial forces to surrender the information I need without getting myself killed? I reasoned.

"I heard names are extra important." I started, and I saw him narrow his eyes at my deceptively cheerful tone.

Maybe I should bullshit my way through. I reasoned, and once more I asked myself if bringing around Dionysus mark had made me somehow prone to madness.

"So you can call me... mmmh." I tapped my chin "Do you have a suggestion?"

The titan blinked: "You aren't even going to put in the effort to trick me for something?" His deep voice hid wonderfully the strain he was under, but couldn't mask his incredulity.

"Hey, it's not like I'll be the one to use my fake name to refer to myself, that would be just silly, wouldn't it?" I retorted.

Atlas eyebrows narrowed: "I tire quickly of this game, mortal."

I smiled as wide as I could: "Well, that's your fucking problem isn't it?"

The titan *growled*, the heaviness of his intent slamming on me like the sky itself.

Too bad he cannot move. I reassured myself. "You go too far mortal, you don't know what you're bringing on yourself." his voice was even, but nevertheless it carried the weight of his presence.

Yes, Dionysus definitely made me more prone to madness. I decided

I dropped my elbow on my knee, resting my cheek against my palm, and stared at the titan holding the sky.

"Hey, you're the one who asked for my name, I just told you to make up one for me. I know who I am, and I know who you are. So I am comfortable in my position of advantage." I kept my cheerful tone.

"Even Heracles was warier when he came." Atlas muttered, "You want me to grab an apple for you, it can be arranged, *nameless*, just come over here and share a bit of my burden."

At that, I laughed. I got that immortals didn't actually change, but from being encased in time to never learning anything the stretch was ridiculous.

"That's an old trick, Atlas." I spluttered among my laughs, and yet I felt his name heavy on my tongue, there was some magic tied to it, and it was... frankly beyond me. *For now.*

The face of the titan turned serious: "You won't use my name with impunity, you dare too much, without knowing what it will cost you."

"I know a lot of things." I grinned smartly, before changing my pose and sitting cross-legged, my palms resting on my knees, I bent forward a bit, like I actually wanted to get closer: "Clymene is the

daughter of the Titans Oceanus and Tethys, thus making her an Oceanid. She is the goddess of renown, fame, and infamy."

I watched as his eyes narrowed, before going on: "Iapetus is a Titan, son of Uranus..." I glanced to the impossible mass of the sky resting on Atlas' shoulders, before looking around his knee and foot: "... and Gaea, and father of Atlas, Prometheus, Epimetheus, and Menoetius."

"Iapetus' name derives from the Greek word meaning 'to pierce', usually with a spear; therefore, Iapetus may have been considered as the god of craftsmanship, although most people cite him as the god of mortality."

I tilted my head, considering carefully Atlas' unchanging expression: "Your father was also considered the personification of one of the four pillars that held the heavens and the earth apart, a role that he later bequeathed to you. He represented the pillar of the west, the other three being represented by his brothers Crius, Coeus, and Hyperion. The four brothers actively played a role in the dethroning of your dearest grandfather." I watched again at the column of sky a few meters from me."

I rolled my shoulders to free them from the stiffness: "As your father and his brothers were all in the four corners of the earth, they held the sky firmly in place while Cronus castrated him with a sickle."

Atlas' face remained perfectly still, not betraying anything: "You and your brothers are thought to have been the ancestors of humans, and that somehow you passed your flaws to my mortal brethren: so, although Prometheus was clever, he bequeathed scheming to mankind; Epimetheus, guileless as he was, passed down stupidity; Menoetius, an arrogant personality, bequeathed violence; and finally, you, Atlas, being powerful and patient, gave excessive daring."

I took off my sunglasses, it wasn't like I actually needed them, the whole place was hidden from the sun by the *fucking sky* itself: "So you see, I know a lot."

The titan was perfectly still, staring at me without betraying his thoughts. *Seriously, I could swear that dyslexia was the gods way to keep the demigods from learning about the world they are in. Hitting a random library would grant this info to anyone.*

I smiled: "Of all the titans, you are by far one of the most interesting that I wanted to meet." And it was even the truth.

"And why is that?" Atlas looked at me.

I tilted my head again, rolling on the ground and coming to rest on my back, staring at the ominous celestial mass held back by the titan.

"Because you represent unending determination, unrelenting defiance, and acceptance of an ungrateful task for the sake of others." I started.

That surprised him, it was plain to see.

"The one that can destroy a resource, controls it. Why don't you just let go?"

"The sky must be willingly taken from me, it can't be left to fall, otherwise it would crush everything under its weight for thousands of kilometers in every direction, even I couldn't survive its fall. And there would be far reaching consequences on the long term." the tenor voice of the titan rumbled again.

I narrowed my eyes and remembered dome shit about the second set of Riordan's books, it was vague, but it gave me an edge.

"I take it that the sand didn't always try to climb over you to reach the sky?" I questioned with levity, ignoring the sudden *heaviness* of Atlas' eyes on me.

Then I grinned before smiling as wide as I could, my cheeks hurting.

"*She* is awaking, isn't *she*?" We both knew who I was referring to.

"Be quiet," Atlas ordered me.

Now *that* was interesting, why not? why not let the sky fall? I was reasonably sure that the multiverse theory was real, so everything that could happen happened in a different reality. *So why not this?*

I fingered the handle of one of the daggers on my belt. My smile turning bloodthirsty... "Why would you care?"

I unsheathed a dagger and rose from my seated position, taking a clue from all the shit I saw in my blurred lives, I liked the flat of the blade: "You're hardly having fun holding the sky all by your lonesome self..."

The titan looked... unsettled: "You would kill me? Why?"

I giggled: "Because I want to see what happens, why else? I'm boored."

And on the ruins of mount Othrys, Atlas, the son of Iapetus, grandson of Uranus, the Holder of the Sky, *paled*.

"You would cause your own death because you're *bored*?" he was scared or outraged, maybe both.

I was intrigued, *Immortals don't really consider self-sacrifice unless it's for something really important, do they?*

"I'm mortal, eventually I'll die anyway, and the world is honestly a dreary place. Humans actually like to think their lives have some kind of greater meaning when all goes back to *doing something* to prove to yourself your own existence. Even the gods die, Hell, in less than a billion years the sun will explode and engulf all the planets up to Saturn, the solar system will then crumble apart under the absence of gravity as a unifying factor and the slow entropic death of the universe..." I rolled my eyes "Besides, I think the Fates choose to give me this life as some part of a plan, and I honestly despise following other people's wishes unless there is a good reason, and

the inevitability of the end of this reality denies the existence of such a reason." I concluded my nihilistic rant shrugging.

"You... could visit my daughters' garden, it's right down the side of the mountain, you can access it only at dusk, it's the most beautiful garden to ever blossom." He offered "I'm sure you've heard about the Hesperids, it would be difficult to be... *bored*..." I'm reasonably sure he would have shivered if the weight of the sky would have allowed it.

I huffed: "I know all about the garden and the golden apples, and Ladon, it's not like I can manage to steal a tooth from the dragon and take seventeen apples from the tree."

The titan blinked a couple of times, likely wondering about the number 17, before visibly shaking his head and wisely choosing to ignore it: "Why not facing Ladon? It would be a more interesting death than dying crushed under the sky." Atlas offered.

"Bah, being killed by a giant dragon sounds extremely boring," I tilted my head and watched again at the unending mass of clouds converging on the Titan's shoulders, it was marvelous, and I let my fascination show on my face, "At least in comparison with making the sky *fall*."

I walked over the Titan and trailed my fingers on the sky. It was cold, and slightly damp, and *impossibly hard*. I tapped it gently with my dagger, letting the surprisingly metallic '*clink*' echo around.

"I wonder if there will be another generation of titans once Uranus falls on this mountain." I muttered, giggling quietly.

Then I bent over, staring unflinchingly into Atlas' eyes: "Have you ever considered how well English work as word-play with your anus-Uranus." I let the absurdity of the situation sink in.

Atlas was *horrified* by my blasé disregard of common decency and the value of life: "You're really planning on killing me and die under

the sky?"

I could hear... not fear, he simply could not *understand* how anybody, much less a mortal, could invite death on thousands if his own kind because he was *bored*.

"I've died before." I stage whispered.

"And I am almost sure that every time I die I visit a new reality, the last one was a book I had read in the previous one." I shrugged.

"I've heard that death it's like a door." I continued conversationally, and in an act of madness, I cut away a dark curl of hair from the head of the titan holding the sky, "When one closes, another opens."

"You know, I saw people transplanting eyes somewhere..." I trailed my dagger down from the Atlas' forehead to his completely black eye. The skin splitting open in a thin line despite the exaggerated pressure I was exercising, golden ichor trailed down his cheek and reached its chin falling on the ground in a single droplet.

And the titan responsible for holding the sky was *afraid*.

The power of Words

I trailed my dagger down from the Atlas' forehead to his completely black eye. The skin splitting open in a thin line despite the exaggerated pressure I was exercising, golden ichor trailed down his cheek and reached its chin falling on the ground in a single droplet.

And the titan responsible for holding the sky was afraid.

"Don't." the titan spoke.

Pleaded.

Begged.

It was in his tone, in the way he closed his eyes as he was trying to deny my existence, his fear rippled to the air without his consent, but to me, it was unmistakable.

"Why?" I asked.

Atlas looked at me again, at loss for words, like he had difficulties in understanding me, so my smile widened: "Why shouldn't I?"

The titan licked his lips, his eyes darting around, looking for what, I had no idea, even if I could imagine he was looking for either a weapon or something to bargain.

"I can get you golden apples from the tree..." he whispered.

The gods from Olympus may have been more or less on par with the current times, they were aware of the happenings in the world, Dionysus had slipped me a list of cocktails before one of the parties I threw at the camp, and I remembered Hermes had a cellphone instead of his caduceus.

Atlas was not. And it was more than likely that neither his brothers and sisters were, or his daughters, for what mattered.

Ignorance is the heaviest chain. I realized dryly.

So, when I pushed Atlas into believing me, he went back to the only thing he could offer: completing Heracles' task.

"I would need to hold the sky for you, wouldn't I?" I laughed, hopping around him in an ecstatic little dance: "Yes! How fun!"

I got close to him once again, my nose less than a centimeter from his: "It could be interesting, how much does the sky weigh?"

I twirled on myself: "A man named Archimedes once said: 'Give me a place to stand and with a lever, I will move the whole world.' But the weight of the primordial you hold, it can't be measured, can it? It's immaterial, it's metaphysical!" It was a fascinating idea.

"Heracles was a powerful demigod." Atlas tried to nod, only for the ground under his knee to fissure along a thin crack: "But it was never about strength, only about will. It's always about will, strength is only a small branch of the tree."

"Now that your attention wavers the ground cracks and tries to jump beyond you!" I noted with glee, fascinating was too little a word to describe what I was looking at, and yet it made sense, Atlas passed upon men excessive daring, which was the end result of extreme self-confidence, again, something born from an indomitable will.

Atlas looked at me, unable to understand my mind, and how I could be interested in what was happening in front of me, if only because I was in a very deadly predicament.

"And it's not that you physically can't let the sky fall, it is about your pride, no scratch that. It's about your will!" I realized: "It is because you led the titans in battle in order to claim the heavens, and as such you were punished with the task of holding them!"

My mind was flying as fast as light itself: "You are proving yourself worthy of ruling the heavens by showing to *everyone* that you can hold the *weight* of the position!"

Atlas was perfectly still, neither denying nor confirming my findings, but I could tell, and I could see how his back slightly straightened, like being recognized gave him strength, but I could also tell how the slight lowering of his head showed me that he was preparing himself to be laughed at.

Like a child with a dream that he didn't dare to confess. Something that he would fight for, but that he was used to hiding it from the world, and in that moment, I *understood* Atlas.

And I was awed, among the other things, the titan was the one who had been credited with the creation of Astronomy.

I could believe that this was the one rumored to be well versed in mathematics and philosophy, instead of the two-dimensional character portrayed in Riordan's books.

"**Atlas.**" I repeated, embracing the weight of his pride, his unrelenting determination, and the strength of will that had him effectively shackled to his task.

An immortal had all the time in the world, and differently from Prometheus, he likely had the means to trick some half-god to hold the sky for him.

His daughters are near, and so is Ladon... how long would it take for him to organize something to trick another to take his place? I tried to put myself into his shoes.

He led the Titans to take the Olympus. I reasoned.

He won't leave his position until he has a legitimate chance overthrow the current rule, his pride, his nature, his determination,

his headstrong-ness, his fatal flaw, won't allow anything less. I realized.

He has been birthed by mankind's faith, his psychology and character had grown around a basic concept. He is defined as Strong, Willful, as an immortal with excessive daring. His personality built itself over time around those ideas.

"When Heracles came, you took for him three apples." I resumed the previous line of thought, smiling widely.

Immortals do not change. I smiled widely, I had just made an extraordinary discovery that likely was true for every immortal born out of faith. Heracles, who was now an immortal god, was the same as he was when he ascended, but the path, growth, and history he had up to that moment had been his own.

"I'd like to surpass any that came before me, it sounds... *fun.*" I turned my smile into a conspirational grin.

"I can hold back my boredom for a while, when I'm doing something *interesting.*" I tilted my head, invading his personal space.

"Breaking Heracles' record would be exhilarating." I rolled my shoulders.

"I accept your offer, **Atlas.**" and again I accepted the weight that came with his name: "I'll hold the sky, giving you enough time to grab me 6 apples, twice the number Heracles managed, and to chat with your daughters a bit. Maybe introduce me, since I'll swing by to say hi after your return."

"But be careful." My tone turned *eager* "My will is unbreakable only as long as I am interested. The moment I think I had enough, the sky *falls.*"

The titan stared at me, the suspect that all my madness had been a ruse to drive him to that offer. Frankly, I wasn't sure myself, the more

I thought about what had happened during our discussion, the more interested I was in watching the consequences of letting the sky fall.

"There are many aspects to willpower: determination, focus, dedication, stubbornness, self-control, discipline, bravery, selflessness, and selfishness." Atlas muttered to himself, almost as he was showing me *why* I couldn't make it.

I grinned like a loon: "I *will surpass any that came before me.*" And it was a statement, like saying the 'sky is blue'. I would not be denied.

"The garden is accessible only during the sunset, I'll be as fast as I can, but during the summer the sunset can last as long as an hour and a half, are you prepared to endure?" the titan asked me, licking his lips in trepidation.

I could guess that seeing your daughters after millennia could be overwhelming.

"I am." I stated: "But I shall repeat, I get bored easily, don't make me wait, I don't know after how long the thought of seeing the sky fall will look more fascinating than surpassing those that came before me."

I straightened myself and watched west, where the sun was slowly but surely making its way towards the horizon: "After all," I kept talking, my chat with Hekate blazing into my mind: "There has never been someone like me, so my mark on this reality should be suitably unique."

"So you wish to leave a mark on this world, Nameless?" Atlas wondered, his eyes drifted to the west.

"And doing so as an Immortal, without a doubt..." he grinned a bit, believing that I was bluffing.

"Immortality is the absence of change." I cut him: "Immortality is a golden cage without walls that constricts and limits your choices. I was born free, and I'll die in the same way. The Fates are not cutting

me down right now, does it mean I am fated to destroy the world? So that a new Age can be born from its ashes? Will you keep your word? Will we become friends?"

I was honestly curious about the relationship between the Fates and free will, and pondering out loud, while confirming to Atlas that yes, I would let the sky fall, helped me finding a sense to my existence, if it had one. *Doubtful* I scoffed.

"I will swear on the Stix." Atlas rumbled.

"Don't bother." I shook my head "A promise on the Styx is a chain, and I despise them." Besides, I knew that immortals could break their word.

"You would trust me to keep my word?" the titan was bewildered, and made me laugh.

"I know you, **Atlas**." I turned towards him, noticing that he had stopped trying to reprimand me for the constant use of his name.

"You'll get enough time to see your daughters and an occasion to stretch your legs. I'll get to experiment what holding the sky is like, I'll get to be introduced to your daughters, and six golden apples to the side." I shrugged, it looked clear enough to me.

"If the sky falls, all Olympus will fall on your back even if you manage to escape the aftermath, and you are without an army to lead." I tilted my head.

"It would be glorious... for you, I mean, going out in a blaze of glory, only to be forgotten by the next generation of titans once Uranus manages to find his virility." I pictured the absolute *new* that such a world would be and smiled again.

"Such an event would likely kickstart every apocalypse in every pantheon. Would they mesh? Or would they slide one over another,

like oil and water? Such an event would be seen even by the dead, so I would still be entertained."

For me it was a win-win.

"So you aren't really trusting my word..." Atlas muttered, he sounded almost... offended? By my lack of trust, the thought made me smile devilishly.

"Ooh, don't be like that, my friend." I knelt once more in front of him, bringing my face less than a centimeter from his, finally finding the right words to express my thoughts.

"I despise chains, and you're free to do what you want, either keep your word, or don't: you know the consequences of both those courses of action."

We were very close, and when the sun touched the horizon, Atlas shrugged, and the sky landed on my shoulders.

The cold, damp clouds gave me an instant of relief before the weight settled on me.

I felt like the vertebrae in my spine were being welded together by a blowtorch, my left knee was rammed into the ground, my kneecap screaming murder, my back folding like paper.

No.

I pushed back, straightening my back under the infinite weight.

I was holding pain, suffering, hopelessness, hunger, fear, tiredness.

The weight of the sky didn't have limits, and it eroded me. My consciousness swayed on the brink of the abyss, my thoughts died, my dreams and hopes crumbled, my name was forgotten.

No.

My arms clutched the clouds over my shoulders, grabbing them with despair evident in how blood started to seep from beneath my nails, my teeth were slammed together, making difficult for me to breath properly, my heart was thundering beyond my control.

I held the sky.

I had closed my eyes when Atlas shrugged, and from behind my eyelids, I could see that my task was doomed to fail.

I was no Heracles, no Atlas. I didn't even belong to the PJO reality, I had no purpose, no reason to exist.

I pushed back, my right foot trying to find leverage against the ground, my muscles on the verge of tearing, my bones almost snapping, my ligaments about to be shred, my soul slowly crumbling over the colossal mistake that my pride had led me to make.

No.

I refused to stop pushing back. Like hell I was going to let a tiny thing like the sky kill me. I didn't know if it was possible, but I *held back* the sky. I had willingly taken it, and I would carry through my promise to Atlas.

I would hold the sky until he was back.

Or until I became bored.

And the mad-me that I had pretended to be during my chat with Atlas raised his head, grinning madly in my thoughts.

What if you drop it?

I couldn't not think about it.

Holding the sky was... there weren't words. Painful, yes, beyond whatever mortal could accomplish, sure.

Grating.

Annihilating.

My bones were ground together, my thoughts slowly slurring one against another like they were moving in molten tar, there was only one task, one purpose, one duty.

I pushed.

The sky would not fall.

Time had lost any meaning, and I too, had lost any sense of self, I was crumbling into nothingness, why did I have to suffer? I could just let go...

No.

I gritted my teeth, feeling the tang, metallic taste of blood on my tongue, and I was too far gone to feel any discomfort caused by the sweat coursing from my forehead over to my nose, on the point of which it formed droplets that fell on the ground.

Beyond the agonizing effort, I could feel my bones trembling, my muscles had forgotten what not being contracted meant, my breath was coming in ragged rasps, my lungs aching for more air, for less work, for an *end* to come. My heart was fluttering, blood madly rushing through my veins, washing away cramps that reformed immediately after, but the pain they caused was almost a relief over the white noise of *sheer agony* that I was suffering.

I just wanted for it to end, why would I care about anything else?

The sky started digging into my back. *No.*

I denied it. I was holding it, and it would stay above my shoulders. I pushed like I had never been doing anything else, and for all I knew, all my existence had been pain and the slow eroding of my sense of self, but *that*, that was unforgivable.

My name is Icarus. I remembered.

I was holding the sky, but thinking it wasn't enough. I had to declare it.

Holding the sky was *nothing*. I would do much more, *be* much more, and I would not go quietly in the night after completing what the Fates wanted from me, nor I would be nailed down by the weight of the sky.

"My name is Icarus." I repeated, my voice steady through my rasping breaths, and I opened my eyes in time to see the sunlight dropping behind the horizon, tossing the world into the night.

"My name is Icarus." I said once more: "And **I am free.**"

The sky stood uncomfortably over my shoulders, his pressure not lessening, but I was holding it back. I would not be crushed.

My red-rimmed eyes finally managed to focus on what was happening around me, and my bleary vision made out a humanoid figure looming over me.

Atlas dropped a jute sack on the side of the small plateau, a branch tied to it like a classic cartoon vagabond had used it to pack his things.

He didn't come closer.

I chuckled among my heavy breaths. My body was still trying to give up, but 'mind over matter' became much more real in a world of gods and titans. So I endured.

"I'm not done." I warned Atlas off, I wasn't done playing with the sky.

"How are your daughters?" I asked after a while. The sky was heavy, its willingness to crush me, and whatever was around hadn't abated in the slightest, however, I had reforged my will to endure it. And

everything I was had as a fulcrum myself being **free**. So, simply as that, while I found in myself the strength of will to 'not-fold', I wouldn't.

"Surprised to see me, few manage to reach Otri without crossing their garden." The titan tilted his head, looking at me with something akin to respect: "And curious to meet you, if I have to be honest."

"So you *did* tell them about me." I uttered a rasping laugh.

"I don't know your name, so I couldn't introduce you." the titan grumbled in distaste: even if he had no fault, he disliked not completing every aspect of the pact we had struck: "Are your curiosity and boredom sated now?"

"Did I hold the sky for longer than Hercules?" I asked back, minutely tilting my shoulders to try and alleviate a sudden cramp. I blessed the new pain that allowed me to *not think* about the disastrous state my body was likely in. More than a half-god or not, I sure as hell wasn't built for the kind of effort I was forcing myself through.

"Not yet." he shook his head.

I pushed back the sky, its will trying to squash me. But it couldn't. I knew who I was, and I wouldn't fade because of a dickless primordial.

"Stories credited you with the invention of astronomy." I said, my voice surprisingly even given the effort I was putting in not-dying.

Atlas answered to my unspoken question: "They are true: where my brother birthed the sun, the dawn and the moon, I invented the first celestial sphere."

I rolled his shoulders, likely marveling at the feeling of lightness and freedom that was so uncommon to him.

His voice had turned wistful, and he was staring upwards, towards the starry sky only partially obscured by the column of clouds resting

on my shoulders.

My ears managed to pick up a few words out of his half-whispered grumbling: "... Orion... lots to answer for..."

And my mind shot through all the stories I knew about Orion, suddenly remembering that the seven Pleyads were Atlas' daughters, and they had been chased by Orion, who had also dared to attack their mother, before being turned into doves and then stars by Zeus, so that they could comfort Atlas while he held up the sky, while being safe from the titan, whom still chased them in the sky.

Once more I wondered what the immortals saw when looking at the world, if they could distinguish between the myths they were a part of and the reality mankind had built them from.

"Beer dulls a memory, brand sets it burning, but wine is the best for a sore heart's yearning." I repeated Dionysus words: "There is a leather canteen that won't run out of wine in my backpack." I tilted my head indicating the backpack that I had dropped when I had reached the top of Mont Talampais.

At the titan questioning glance, I tried to shrug, only for the sky to remind me that I couldn't.

"A mortal poet named Hesiod once wrote:

And if longing seizes you for sailing the stormy seas,

when the Pleiades flee mighty Orion

and plunge into the misty deep

and all the gusty winds are raging,

then do not keep your ship on the wine-dark sea

but, as I bid you, remember to work the land."

Without uttering a word, Atlas walked toward my backpack and dug out my canteen, uncorking it and taking long sips. The titan walked back to me and sat down, leaning backwards until he rested on his elbows, free to drink while looking at the stars.

"You know a lot of things for a demigod." he grumbled.

"Talk with me, **Atlas**, the longer you hold my interest, the more you can rest." I reminded him of our respective positions.

"What do you know about my daughters that live in the garden?" he tilted his head, without stopping his stargazing.

I grunted, I may have found a way to not crumble under the sky, but I was far from comfortable, and far from being able to tell a story. The dry chuckle of the titan of strength, endurance, and astronomy told me that he knew it perfectly.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to recount the words that flashed in my mind: "Far on the sloping margin of the western sea sinking Helios had unyoked his flaming steeds, and laved their bright manes in the springs of Oceanus . . . and the swift-striding Hours, who strip him of his reins and the woven glory of his golden coronet, and relive his horse's dripping breasts of the hot harness; some turn the well-deserving steeds into the soft pasture, and lean the chariot backward, pole in air."

The titan let out a deep breath: "Hesperis, the Hour of the evening." he took several gulps of the wine: "She was beautiful and fleeting, with her yellow dress..."

"My daughters remind me of her, thank you for giving me time to talk with them." Atlas reminisced with a wry smile, and I would never again doubt Dionysus power. That wine had turned him into a sappy titan!

"What are their names?" I asked between my deep breaths. The sky tried to crush me in the moment I had lowered my guard, but I

ruthlessly squashed its chance. *I will not bow.*

"Chrysothemis, the Golden law, Asterope, the Starry-faced, Hygieia, and Lipara, the Rich land. It hurt me discovering that one of them betrayed her family, forsaking her own name..." He shook his head.

After a while, his eyes left the east and he was looking somewhere else: "Pleione lived in a southern region of Greece, the mortals of the time called it Arcadia, on a mountain named Kyllini. Mortals used to pray her and make offerings because she had a soft spot for sailors, she called them brave, because they sailed in the night with nothing but their hearts to guide them. With her, I had the Hyades, Hyas, and the Pleiades."

He took several gulps of the wine, a lone tear trailing down his cheek.

"When Hyas died, killed by his own prey, the proud fool, his sisters cried themselves to death. The King placed the Hyades in a cluster on the Taurus constellation, so that at least at night, I can see some of my daughters."

Immortals do not change. I reminded myself, finding that the pain of the ancient being at my side was as raw as it was when the facts happened, millennia before, and that in a twisted way, Atlas respected Zeus, if only because he granted him the possibility to glance upon his daughters.

Time had lost again any meaning during his talking, and so I was extremely surprised when the sky tinted itself pink in the east.

I endured. I would surpass Heracles, freeing myself from the usual aims and limits of a common demigod.

Atlas let out a deep belly laugh, corking my leather canteen and coming close to me: "Now you have surpassed Heracles."

He didn't ask for the sky, he didn't need to, because I managed to force my way through those last agonizing moments, feeling like the sky wanted nothing more than crushing me when I was done because of my impudence. With a familiarity that I wished on nobody, Atlas freed me from my burden.

I shrugged off the weight and fell forward, effectively slamming my face on the ground.

While I passed out, I could hear the deep rumble of Atlas' laugh.

16 July 2000

When the sun touched the horizon, there was a sudden thickening of the Mist all around me, making it more solid, like a curtain. I pushed it aside and crossed it.

When the fog cleared, I was still on the side of the mountain, but the road was dirt covered in thick, lush grass. The sunset made a bloodred slash across the sea. The summit of the mountain seemed closer now, swirling with storm clouds and raw power, Mount Otri looked suddenly... bigger. And the path to the top, which I knew and I had already walked multiple times, was suddenly leading through a lush meadow of shadows and flowers: the garden of twilight.

I eyed the rest of the downhill park with curiosity, it looked more or less the same, while the path going towards the top went through a terrain that clearly wasn't there before.

I ducked under a branch and crossed the meadow, it looked interesting. I walked slowly, relying on the long branch that Atlas had ripped from the golden apple tree. It was a sturdy, straight piece of wood, And I had sweated seven bucks to prune it, stashing in my backpack all the wood and leaves that I divested it of, one could never know when a magical piece of wood could be useful.

The garden was vast and bountiful. The grass itself was lush and vibrating with life. It took me exactly four seconds to take off my shoes and going barefoot across the sea of green. The light breeze made every single blade of grass dance, bringing forth the sweet smell of more flowers that I couldn't either hope to count or recognize.

Beyond flowers littering the grass, and the bushes of roses and whatnot, the trees were outstanding. Their presence was unmistakably magical, but it was far from the dangerous vibe of the forest I grew up in, the magic permeating the air was... *tame*.

It was obvious, from the fluvial stones drawing paths across the garden, that a lot of work had been put in keeping this place cared for. There was an absolute absence of irrigators, meaning that every single flowerbed was cared for individually.

If it hadn't been for the enormous dragon, the garden would've been the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. The grass shimmered with silvery evening light, and the flowers were such brilliant colors they almost glowed in the twilight. Stepping stones of polished black marble led around either side of a five-story-tall apple tree, every bough glittering with golden apples.

As soon as I smelled their fragrance, I knew that one bite would be the most delicious thing I'd ever tasted.

I wanted to step right up and pluck one, except for the dragon coiled around the tree.

Now, I don't know what you think of when I say dragon. Whatever it is, it's not scary enough. The serpent's body was as thick as a booster rocket, glinting with coppery scales. He had more heads than I could count, as if a hundred deadly pythons had been fused together.

He appeared to be asleep. The heads lay curled in a big spaghetti-like mound on the grass, all the eyes closed.

Then the shadows in front of me began to move. There was a beautiful, eerie singing, like voices from the bottom of a well.

Four figures shimmered into existence, four young women, all wearing white Greek chitons. Their skin was like caramel. Silky black hair tumbled loose around their shoulders. They were gorgeous, and, like their father could be, very dangerous.

"What are you doing in our garden mortal?" asked one.

I raised an eyebrow: "You mean Queen Hera's garden, don't you?"

I wasn't sure, but the slight darkening of her cheeks told me she was embarrassed by my answer.

"Answer her question!" Thundered another, even if her voice was more like the sweetness of honey than the rumble of thunder. She expected to be obeyed, and so I acquiesced her request.

"Taking a stroll." I grinned: "And Atlas told the truth, her daughters truly are more beautiful than the sunset they incarnate." I dipped my head slowly.

"Do not lie!" Hissed the third: "We can tell someone has been sent to steal from us."

"Well, it's not really my quest, and I don't really care about immortality right now, I'd prefer to hit 25 or something like that before stopping aging." I shrugged, acutely conscious of the sack on my shoulders: "And again, you are only caretakers of the Garden, it's not yours, so I would be stealing from the queen."

Number Three hissed in displeasure, her cheeks darkening like her first sister's ones.

"Then why would you come here?" The fourth asked quietly.

"I wanted to chat with Atlas, to hear if the stories were true." I answered.

When they stared impassively at me, I grinned mischievously.

"Honestly, I also wanted to meet the fabled nymphs of the sunset." And I lifted the canteen I had strapped at my waist: "I brought wine, and I thought we could have fun, you must have missed a lot of things, being cooped here for thousands of years."

"I don't believe you." Said one.

"Like all the others, you want to steal a golden apple." Said another.

I snorted: "I know Ladon dearest has been put here by the Queen of the gods in order to keep *you* from stealing apples."

I grinned, and sat down in the clearing: "I hoped to find a way to relieve some of your boredom."

"So you are here as a vanguard, to clean the way to other silly demigods?" One asked.

"Fools that dare attempt to take what cannot be taken by mortal hand?" asked another.

The third one simply gazed at me with eyes that spoke of nightshade, of dusk, of the end of the domain of men. There was something... in her posture, I decided. She was less guarded, likely because she believed Ladon would eat me sooner or later, or because she had caught on what my presence there meant.

I reached inside my pocket and took out a single golden apple, feeling it thrumming with *everything*, whispering promises to my senses, singing to my blood, begging to be eaten.

My mind cut through the compulsion, rooting myself into place, and I turned to watch the Hesperids, finding tiny differences among them and trying to figure out who was who.

Chrysothemis, was likely the most stuck up of the four, Asterope was the one on my left, given how her face seemed to almost sparkle,

Hygieia on my right, and Lipara was the one closest to me, given that her hips looked slightly larger than her sisters'.

"I held the sky while your father came here, I'm very sore, I thought we could relax together, and share this beauty." even if I had no intention of eating it, it was too soon for me to tackle immortality.

And just like that, it was like I had flipped a switch, their animosity vanished, and their eyes turned hungry.

"You held the sky for all that time?"

"You are very strong for a mortal."

"It's been a long time since we last talked with father."

"There is a pond where we can wash your tiredness away."

At the end of the day, I had left Half Blood camp in order to spite Luke and complete his quest before him. I had succeeded, only having to channel my inner Heat Ledger Joker and hold up the sky for a whole night.

Even if I did it more because I could than for any kind of actual necessity.

At this point, like hell I wasn't trying to bang the nymphs.

Another Task

21 July 2000

I had never been very self conscious, but even if I had been, such a character flaw would have been literally stripped away from me very fast.

Four days of heaven. That was the only way I could use to describe what had happened to me. I felt the tyrsus disguised as a cork necklace rest heavy on my chest, it was my only item of clothing, and thanks to that, Dionysus had become my favourite deity.

Seconds didn't pass in the garden, it was always dusk, and I measured time through the cycles of hunger and 'sleep' with the Hesperids.

Or, I would have, if I hadn't drunk myself into a stupor with the immortal beauties whom I had gifted an apple to. I fed on fruits and beauty, bathing in a warm natural source of water and rolling with them over the lush grass.

I had left my clothes with my backpack and the pruned branch of the Golden Apple Tree near the hedges, some part of my mind knew that I could leave the garden only at dusk. But the dusk of the mortal world wasn't something I could be aware of while staying in the garden. Frankly, I knew that Thalia and Luke were to arrive sooner or later, and sol had enjoyed my vacation.

They would arrive in four days. For me, time had lost any meaning, it felt like weeks had passed since I held the sky, and I remember seeing Chrysothemis pruning hedges and trees, Asterope giving new life to the plants that dared shine a tiny bit less than they could.

There was a subtle song going around, made of whispers and promises and shifting colors and stretching shadows. It was the

voice of the garden itself, no scratch that, it was the voice of the magic permeating the air, of the intent of the Hesperids of taking care of it.

Hygieia enjoyed plucking the fruits from trees or bushes, we dined on them, feeding each other, while Lipara was the one to plant new flowers. From where she took the seeds, I had no idea.

I had seen each of them occasionally sing to Ladon, to keep him appeased, even if he looked nervous anytime they came too close. And by nervous, I meant that more than half of his heads were awake and looking around.

It had the effect of making *me* nervous. A lot. Ladon was the unholy son of Typhon and Echidna, and it was a being of nightmares. I stood as far from the tree as I could, and I fuzzily remember the nymphs of sunset laughing at me. I remember laughing too.

After ages, or barely a few hours since I started drinking with them, I felt something at the edges of my memory. I opened my eyes and saw trees stretched against the eternal dusk.

But while the sky felt *right*, a part of me recognized that it had no right to be, something was amiss. I missed seeing the moon, and Atlas' daughters deserved at least a casual 'hello'. With the stars hidden, I simply couldn't.

The tall and lush grass was all around me, while a few feet away Liparia was resting, her naked body loosely splayed in sleep.

She looked smooth and perfect as a sculpture. She sighed in her sleep, and I chided myself for the thought. I knew she was nothing like cold stone. She was warm and supple, the smoothest marble grindstone by comparison, and the caramel color of her skin was of a beauty beyond human.

I blinked. *Beyond human*. I repeated the thought to myself, and I started recollecting the strands of my psyche.

My hand reached out to touch her, but I stopped myself, not wanting to disturb the perfect scene before me and being grateful for every second that I could dedicate to find again my thoughts.

In my pride and carelessness, I had forgotten an old truth: Do not trust the appearances.

Yes, the Hesperids were beautiful and harmless, Ladon would kill only those who dared take from the tree, there were no poisons in the air or in the water, the wine was a gift from Dionysus... in other words, there were no direct threats to my life.

And like an idiot I didn't consider that everything can potentially kill me. I realized.

It was understandable, I had been on a high since holding the sky...

...holding the sky? What the fuck?

My mind was in disarray, I couldn't exactly remember... *Icarus, my name is Icarus.*

My thoughts slowly regained their previous sharpness.

Lipari's lips parted and sighed, making a sound like a dove. I remembered the touch of those lips. I ached, and forced myself to look away from her soft, flower-petal mouth.

Her closed eyelids were patterned like a butterfly's wings, swept in whorls of deep purple and black with traceries of pale gold that blended to the caramel color of her skin. The shadows on her features were soft like velvet, promising rest, reminding me that she wasn't human. As her eyes moved gently in sleep, the shadowy pattern shifted, as if the butterfly fanned its wings.

I ate her with my eyes, knowing that I should quit while I was ahead.

Something in my mind screamed at me, but I was bemused by the motion of her eyes beneath her lids, the shape her mouth made, as if

she would kiss me even while she slept.

I was going to go mad, or die.

The idea finally fought its way through to my conscious mind, and I felt every hair on my body stand suddenly on end. I had a moment of perfect, clear lucidity that resembled coming up for air and quickly closed my eyes.

I had seen immortals before, I had seen her and her sisters as soon as I stepped into Hera's garden, and my mind didn't fall under the captivating appearances.

But it wasn't that, or better, not just that. I was seeing *more*. *The four Hesperids didn't look so captivating before our shared edonism...*

Behind my eyes, the Hesperid distracted me. The sweet breath. The soft breast. The urgent half-despairing sighs that slipped through hungry, petal-tender lips..

I don't doubt for a second that it had, quite naturally, deprived men of their faculties in the past. I, however, knew myself to be quite sane. Or at the very least, I knew that I was the only one to direct my thoughts. Madness had come to play with me with my chat with Atlas, I had started pretending, but soon I had found myself ensnared in my own web. It was something worthy of future investigation.

I briefly entertained the notion that I was insane and didn't know it. Then I considered the possibility that I had always been insane, acknowledged it as more likely than the former, then pushed both thoughts from my mind, reminding to myself that until my madness brought me to try to fly into the fucking sun with wings made of wax, I could deal with it.

But why did my mind return to me only in that moment? Why not before? Why not later? Then I felt it, a subtle shift in the air, a ripple

in the magic of the garden, a change in the quality of the light I had grown used to.

Lipari's light frown made clear that she felt the same. I looked around, taking notice of the passed out nymphs around me while I rose from the ground and walked away.

Dionysus, thank you. I was grateful, for the wine, over which I had bonded with Atlas and thanks to which I had disabled the first alarm system of the garden. I was thankful because of the slight madness that had allowed me to accomplish great things like holding the sky and shagging four nymphs.

I had the feeling I had forgotten something, but it didn't come to mind, and I knew that trying to remember wouldn't make it come up any time sooner. I shrugged, *What will be, will be.* I thought briefly.

I didn't know how did I manage to be so attuned to the magic in the garden, either because of my blood, for the long period of time that I had spent in there, for what I had shared with the nymphs, but what I had felt the first time I walked on the lush, magic grass, paled in comparison to what I was able to understand now.

I could feel the constant breathing of the plants and the ever working fatigue of their roots, my eyes naturally landed on the ripest fruit. In the same ethereal, not explainable, complex, mysterious way, now that I had somehow regained all of my faculties, the sky unnerved me.

I didn't feel exceedingly powerful, or suddenly donned with a new undeniable right to rewrite the laws of reality, I was still myself, only... more aware.

The celestial sphere went from the golden pink of the west to the dark purple of the east, the shades were undeniably beautiful, even charming, but I wanted to see the sky that I had held, not a single state of it.

Suddenly, I came to realize that I was in a cage, one without walls, without bars, and worst of all: without reasons to leave.

But I have to. I reminded myself. I didn't need to leave. *I want to.* The world was big and mysterious, things to see, things to do, knowledge to steal, to earn, battles to be fought, enemies to be turned into friends, friends to turn into brothers, fates to break, gods and immortals to annoy.

"I am free." I whispered to myself what I realized was my first truth, my first commandment, the first brick of the foundation that was my identity.

Whatever half wish to stay back with Lipari, Hygieia, Chrysothemis and Asterope whitered away in my mind. I regained control of my thoughts and walked away from the sleeping nymphs, wary of waking them.

I shook my head, my memories were slow to return, and with a grimace I remembered offering my only apple to the nymphs in order to... well, it had been a blatant conversation starter to reach the manly purpose of having sex. I was... conflicted.

I wasn't exactly hating my lust, since I didn't regret what was likely the best experience of my life so far, but Hades, maybe I could have kept for my lonesome self a single slice?

No use thinking about it now. I reminded myself, walking toward the disturbance I had felt at the edges of my perception.

I ducked under branches and weaved through flowerbeds, ignoring the path made of flat fluvial stones. I didn't wrap myself in Mist, it was unnecessary, the garden knew me and somehow it acquiesced my need for being unseen, likely knowing that I wasn't sneaking around in order to steal.

It says something about my life that I manage to think that a garden knows my intentions with a straight face. I noted dryly.

After several minutes, I reached the origin of the disturbance, and seeing the cause, I let out the breath I had been holding and stepped out from among the trees a big grin plastered on my face.

"Icarus!" Thalia called me first.

I waved my hand: "Yo!"

"You're here! Why would you be here?" Luke sounded tired.

"You're naked!" Thalia accused me at the same time.

"Oh, yeah, that too."

"Put something on!" she ordered me, blushing scarlet, but I noticed that she didn't turn around and kept looking at me.

I nodded, recognizing the validity of her request, and walked to the hedge, finding the bundle of clothes that I had thoughtfully left near the exit.

Where are my backpack and the pruned branch of the tree? I frowned, something was itching at the edge of my thoughts. I remembered working on the wood, and I remembered using it as a aid to walk after the crucible that holding the sky had been.

I scratched my head while looking around. *Maybe is near another part of the hedge?* I wondered and started walking clockwise, my eyes scanning my surroundings.

A hand clamped on my shoulder: "What. Are. You. Doing. Here?" Luke bit out, Thalia was looking at me expectantly.

"Looking for my stuff." I answered blankly.

"So you didn't somehow find a way to precede us to the location where we have to complete our quest?" Thalia sounded sarcastic.

"Luke's quest." I answered without thinking about it. *Courious, the hedges behave almost like smoke. I wonder, if I hop through will I find myself in the Mount Talampais Reserve?*

I kept walking, the other two demigods following me: "Well, I clearly won the race to this place, but like Luke loves repeating, it's your quest, I wasn't invited, was I?"

The son of Hermes snarled something and stomped into the garden, his eyes blind to the beauty of the place, leaving Thalia alone to deal with my passive-aggressive snark.

"So you're not helping us?" She asked sardonically.

She already knew my answer, and that helping wasn't the point.

"I hope Luke has enough sense as to not awaken anybody, the nymphs are KO, so they won't rise the alarm, but dragging on yourself the ire of the dragon is suicide." I continued walking, sad for the absence of the branch, which was arguably a priceless treasure almost on par with the apples.

"It's not our first rodeo, you know." She rolled her eyes: "What are you looking for?"

"My stuff." I answered non committally.

"And why should your stuff be along the edge of the Garden? No, scratch that, why were you naked in the first place?"

I knowingly ignored her question and she smacked my head. Not happy with the result, she zapped me.

"Oi!" I protested "Why would you do that?!"

"Because you disappeared without saying anything to anyone, dumbass! And don't ignore my question!" her tone had turned somewhat steely, and I felt her trying to exercise some kind of *authority* over me. I looked at her with a raised eyebrow, noticing that

she hadn't even done it on purpose, and my mind shrugged off her command effortlessly. *I am free.*

"I K.O.ed the nymphs." I answered, letting her find her own answers.

Since I was still walking the edge of the Garden and I wasn't looking at her, I couldn't see her expression. Even so, her baffled face made a clear jump to the forefront of my mind. I could almost see her brain trying to link KO nymphs with my being naked, and failing at it repeatedly.

Then in her head it *clicked*, and she was reduced to a spluttering mess for a couple of seconds, before pulling herself back together: "Yes, comic relief so harsh that has them laughing into unconsciousness." she tried to tease me.

"I saw you staring before, trying to downplay your reaction is futile..." I teased over my shoulder, ready to give up my search.

I earned myself another zap. "Yow! Fucking Hades, Sparkles, contain your lust!"

I had turned to face her by then, with a playful smirk on my face and the admittedly inflated ego of a sixteen years old who had just finished a 4 days long sex marathon (even if I was counting the numerous occasions in which I remembered doing other stuff in it).

Before she could school the blushing outrage that proudly danced on her face, a nightmarish choir of horror cut whatever levity we were having.

GROOKKRAGRORR

It wasn't a roar, oh no, neither a thunder or a rockslide. It wasn't even an earthquake, Hades, I was dreaming of hurricanes and tsunami. But the reality was much worse.

The ground shook and the air thundered, suddenly turning heavy and oppressive, above the canopy of the garden, I saw a flowing glint of scales, my ears too busy with the chours of hissing rumbling to hear what Thalia was saying.

Ladon sounded pissed. Or just awake: it was a horrible situation either way.

Thalia and I shot through the well cared for trees and flowerpots, our feet skipping us from a flat stone to another in order to not waste momentum against the slightly damp ground. My hand instinctively brought out the dagger that I had used to freak out Atlas from the sheat where it was secured.

Thalia's shield blared to life and her spear was crackling with the promise of lightning by the time we reached the center of the garden. The tree stood uncaringly, the wound caused by the relatively small branch Atlas had ripped away was still glistening with golden resin, and I distractedly wondered if it was akin to ichor.

On the other side of the clearing, Lipari, Hygieia, Chrysothemis and Asterope were standing with expression that cycled from outraged to amused. Thankfully, they were dressed, and as such I managed to bring my eyes back to the more important detail of Luke giving proof of his extraordinary prowess in *dodging*. His sword flashed from time to time, but only to redirect a bite.

It was extraordinary, the sheer momentum the son of Hermes was keeping up to be able to do so had to be staggering, coupled with the speed through which he kept rolling, jumping running and sweeping, it was beyond what I ever imagined him capable of.

The worrying part, was that neither Thalia nor I were the kind of fighter that never got hit. She with her shield, and I with my stubbornness, we both used tanking the enemy's blows as an opening, and from how she was grinding her teeth together, she realized it immediately.

My knife was returned to its sheath and the Mist rolled over the monster who was still sporting several bruises and cuts gifted to him by Atlas.

Say what you want, but the old fucker hits the hardest. I grinned, recognizing the might of my... acquaintance.

Soon enough, incorporeal images of Luke started to weave their way through each other, the original son of Hermes, and the heads of Ladon.

Following my lead, Thalia had turned her attention to the sky, which had clouded, despite the constant that was the eternal dusk we were fighting in.

"We need to leave before the sunset outside ends, or we'll be trapped with four pissed nymphs and the most horrible thing since Steve Buscemi." I rattled off to Thalia, referring to Ladon. She took a moment to consciously ignore the comparison before sighing in agreement.

"Our plan was a dash and run either way." She muttered.

Random sounds of things that weren't there started echoing across the clearing, courtesy of one of my newest tricks, while I bit down on my tongue to avoid cursing the sheer stupidity of them both.

Feeling my discomfort and sheer disgust, she amended: "Well, my plan to shot an arrow to rip an apple off was discarded for whatever reason."

"Apples explode when hit by an arrow." I deadpanned. *Unless this world is a crossover with Robin Hood: Men in Tights.*

The sudden lightning blinded me for a moment and then the thunder drowned Thalia's answer. If not for her blush, I would have deemed the timing a coincidence.

"Luke!" She shouted as soon as the thunder faded, "We need to run, we'll try again, but we need to go!"

That had the unfortunate consequence of placing us in the same league of the thief in the eyes of Ladon.

While its serpentine body was still coiled around the trunk of the apple tree, its heads were placed on top of very long and strong necks, and as such both me and Thalia had to throw ourselves aside when like twenty deadly dragon heads started biting off the ground where we had stood not a second before.

We ran around the clearing, mirroring each other, Thalia using her shield to great effect to stall the beast when it came too close, and I weaving illusions to take my place while my body turned invisible. Somehow, at least five of Ladon's heads kept following me around, if because of luck or because they knew my general position, I didn't know.

Somehow, in all the madness that an enraged Ladon was, we managed to regroup at the edge of the clearing.

Unfortunately, we were still in range of the scaly motherfucker, who fell on us like a landslide.

I jumped over a head that had lunged to eat me holding my breath, avoiding the poisonous exhalations from the deadly mouths eager to swallow me whole while I slid under another, the sheer terror I was feeling battling with the exhilaration that simply staying alive was filling me with.

My knife had been tailor made by the Aephestus' kids: I had no idea how, but they had managed to make blend of steel and celestial bronze, and while its effectiveness against monsters was greatly reduced, I could use it to skin the animals I occasionally hunted in the forest around my secret lair. It had a saw section on the edge, a long blade and a curved point. A glorified butcher's knife, nothing more, but it could cut small branches as well as ropes. It was a multi

purpose knife, and in the madness that I was experimenting, I found out that it could penetrate wonderfully between a scale and the next, briefly giving me an anchor of sorts on a neck that I found myself riding.

I dodged, spun and jumped. I pushed off Luke that used the momentum I gave him to bury his word into a gleaming, hungry eye, causing the head holding it to reel back in pain, effectively stopping several other heads from swarming us.

Academically, I knew that Ladon had one hundred heads and that there was no way in hell they could all fit around us, since each one was at least as big as a minivan.

And yet at least 85% of his heads fit perfectly around us.

Thalia managed to occasionally stall a single head with her shield, while her spear kept calling on lightnings that she freely shared with the scaly motherfucker intent on killing us. Luke and I were more or less accessories to her awesomeness, even in those moments, I could recognize it without shame.

My tricks with the Mist were useful, but they were just that, tricks, and Luke was noticeably slower than before: he was starting to grow tired. Thalia was the one doing the lion's share of the 'keeping us alive': both attracting Ladon's attention and proving herself tough enough to require several dozen heads to work together.

Our fight for survival found a balance of sorts, with Luke and I supporting the daughter of Zeus, who started to call the shots: "Let's retreat, but keep your backs toward the edge of the clearing!"

There was neither time nor reason to discuss her orders, so we started retreating, flashes of lightning and Thalia's shield as our cover.

I was focused on avoiding dying, so my eyes couldn't follow the other two demigods' movements, but suddenly, I heard a *slam*. Luke

was hurled over my head and slammed against a tree.

"Luke!" Thalia called, but there was no answer. *At least he was tossed in the right direction.* I considered.

I managed to find a way back to the slumped body of the demigod, accurately avoiding the several extremely deadly attacks of Ladon. Could I have punched the dragon with the sane strength that allowed me to hold the sky? Maybe. But a life and death situation wasn't the place to experiment with the possible applications of my newfound *will*. In any case, I doubted it: holding the sky had been a confrontation between my identity and the latent desire of Ouranos. My will had overcome, for a time, the distracted, half-hearted wish of the sky to fall. Punching had nothing to do with testing my will, and as such, I would probably only end up hurting myself.

Or I could pull a Nepero from HunterXHunter... My mind distractedly offered while I took the unconscious form of Luke over my shoulders.

"Thalia! We need to..." I started to call her back when...

KRABOOM

Like when we first arrived at the camp half blood, the world had gone white for an instant before my ears started hating me.

This time however, I wasn't facing Thalia when she broke the sky apart, thusly keeping my sight. A tug on my shoulder later, I found myself running at her side towards the black marble path that led to our exit.

For roughly two minutes, we half dragged, half pushed ourselves: Thalia busy covering our asses with a veritable lightning storm I wasn't aware she could summon, I busy holding Luke and twisting the Mist in order to confound Ladon as much as I could.

By then, I was dead on my feet, and I could barely recognize the patch of grass in front of me from the one behind, but Thalia must have kept us in the right direction, because soon enough, the air lost its shimmer, the grass stopped singing, the leaves stopped whispering, and the world felt... dimmer.

My heart clenched in sorrow at the loss, before my mind actually started working again and I slumped in relief. I let Luke fall down from my shoulders and started looking around, noticing with mild surprise that we were close to one of touristic point of access of the Mount Tamalpais State Park, just behind a few trees, a position secluded enough to not grab the attention of a tourist.

I eyed my rescuers-companions critically, ascertaining their wounds. I hoped to find none.

Luke was still K.O., but beyond a bump on his head, he looked fine, he wasn't pale nor he was losing blood, so it was fine. Thalia was panting, her back against a trunk, her shield folded back and her collapsable spear held tight in her right hand, her black hair slick with sweat, a bloodied grin on her face...

Bloodied? I stopped, paling dramatically when she spat a glob of blood on the side.

"Shit." she cursed, while I ran at her side: inspecting her closely. The only open wound that I could spot was a deep gnash on her right thigh, sign of her only mistake. *But why is she spitting blood then?*

"Don't go all mother hen on me, it's only a scratch." She protested against my examination, opening a leather pouch and popping down an ambrosia cube.

"Thalia, why the fuck would you spit blood if the wound is on your leg?" She wasn't taking notice of the situation's seriousness.

"It was the side of the tooth, he didn't manage to bite me, only cut with the unbelievably sharp side of the fang." She rolled her eyes:

"And another head skull bashed me, nothing to worry about."

Spitting blood is plenty to worry about. I tied quickly a bandage on her most greivous wound, and without further fanfare, I checked again Luke, who was still busy enjoying Morpheus' realm.

Thalia passed me a small vial of nectar, that I forced him to swallow, massaging his neck to make sure he would not suffocate: "Why do you think he charged without thinking?" I asked Thalia, who shrugged, busy trying to stand.

"He needs to grow up." she replied almost grimly, and then, she chose that exact moment to fall back to the ground, her eyes fluttering, like she was trying to force them open.

I flung myself to her side holding her head while I checked for other injuries: "Thalia? What happened!?" I touched her forehead and bristled when I felt it burning with fever. Caught by a sudden doubt, I undid the bandage on her leg, finding it sizzling.

"One hundred venomous heads of dragon, obviously." I breathed out.

Exactly when I had started to relax, everything went to shit. *Classic.*

Warnings and Bargains

21 July 2000

First-class is bullshit. I thought distractedly, running my hand over the velvet-like seat before changing the wet cloth on Thalia's forehead.

The Mist was awesome: tossing Luke and Thalia on a taxi for the airport had been almost a trivial task, and bringing them on the first flight to NY ridiculously easy. I wrapped us, demigods, into my classic invisibility shell, my standard move while traveling, and approached the first pompous captain I had spotted walking around. Making him believe that he was an aviator and that I was his direct superior had been tricky, but far from ineffective. With Thalia on a wheelchair and Luke still lunged over my shoulders, I followed the man bypassing hours of documents-check and whatnot, essentially walking the corridors reserved to the personnel, occasionally swapping my Mist induced control over someone else.

From start to finish? It took me fifteen minutes to reach the airplane, two to make sure that three mortals left us their passports and tickets, another three to make those who checked our identities believe that both Thalia and Luke were conscious and that our faces matched the IDs. It was a novel application of my mastery over the Mist, but not too different from what I used to do as a kid to make people believe I had already paid them.

The flight should have lasted between 5 and 6 hours, however, the captain informed us that we picked an unexpected contrary wind, so the flight would likely last at least 7. Saying that I disliked Zeus was an understatement.

"What... what happened?" Luke awoke with a groan, just in time for me to clean his clock with a punch to the face.

I understood him, I truly did. He had some crush for Thalia, but she liked me, it was hard to miss, *Even if I notice only because of how Thalia has ogled my bare ass*. That did not help against his blatant inferiority complex, which had made him snap at the worst possible moment.

Which would have been ok, in any situation *but* the one we were into.

The way my knuckles snapped against the cartilage of his nose likely wouldn't be helping our friendship. But really, I couldn't care less. Once he was unconscious again, I went back to my inefficient nursing of Thalia, who refused to wake for more than a few scant, feverish seconds during which she grumbled and alternated cursing with puking.

At least she's so out of it that she doesn't know we are on an airplane. I thought with a shadow of amusement.

"This is not what I was expecting to see." a voice stole me from my musings. Not a simple voice. A *voice*.

Something that trembled with unexpressed power, a sound that withheld a hidden quality and depth. Something that I sure as hell not only wasn't expecting, but I actively tried to avoid.

I turned my head towards the source of the sound to find a woman in her late thirties, with a regal bearing and features that seemed cut in marble. Flawless skin, large breasts, wide hips, delicate hands. Her elegant black dress, despite being somewhat conservative, didn't manage to subtract anything to her statuary beauty.

"Who might you be?" I asked, wary of some form of attack. Not that I could have done anything to stop it, in any case.

She gave me a pointed stare before she raised her left hand to adjust the brown hair that didn't need to be fixed, but I caught her only accessory: a simple golden band on her ring finger. Her brown

eyes with sparks of gold captured again my attention when she rose a delicate eyebrow, as to say 'Are we really playing this game?'

Begrudgingly, I lowered my head in what could have passed for an approximation of a bow, if seen through squinted eyes in a dark room: "Queen of the Gods."

Normally I would have called her by name, and fuck the consequences, however, I was on an airplane in the company of bastards, being one myself. And Thalia was Zeus' daughter, I had hoped that this would be enough to keep the flight safe since we were crossing the King of the Gods' domain, but with Hera here...

"Such hardship only to pretend proper manners." She commented, her expression managing to convey how much I displeased her without having to influx her voice with any kind of tone. I couldn't help it, and my lips parted to reveal a mirthless smile that showed too many teeth to be anything but a barely restrained snarl. **I am free.**

The first brick that defined this existence of mine strengthened my resolve, keeping me from falling from my seat in a crumpled mess. Bowing was no longer among the things I could accomplish without forcing myself.

Maybe I should see this as a bargain? I'll be courteous and she won't turn us into motes of dust? However, an agreement set conditions, and I could almost feel the weight the use of manners was imposing upon me. It wasn't a chain, not by a long shot, and I needed to bear it, doing so willingly. Still, it felt forced, and I felt my muscles tense under my skin.

"At least you show that you value your lives above your pride." She kept her absolutely unimpressed attitude: "It's more than I can expect given your less than decent origin, and still less than what I would usually demand."

I waited in silence, not quite meeting her eyes, and without a doubt *not* ogling her. It would have been a slight insult to the Holiness that was marriage and if Zeus found out I had no doubt he could deep fry my bones with a lightning bolt.

"We'll make do, I suppose." She hauntingly sniffed, staring me down: "You know why I'm here." her voice was like a golden trumpet stating its value, it was clear and demanding.

I only nodded, I Hated the idea of needing her license to speak, but I had to keep the others two safes, and while usually, gods couldn't directly challenge mortals, I suspected that our escapades in her garden counted as an attack. I felt like I was walking in thin ice, and the silence stretched itself for a couple of minutes while she kept watching me.

"So you can show some resemblance of respect, I would call it admirable if I didn't know it's shown out of fear." She tilted her head: "But why would you fear me, mmh?"

She rose from her seat and strode regally in my direction: "Perhaps you know I have a reason to be... upset, with you? For something more than the conditions of your birth maybe?"

Her sarcasm went vastly unappreciated by me, and I couldn't help but to mentally thank Hypnos for keeping both Thalia and Luke asleep.

"Do you understand why the circumstances make me... Ah, let's say curious, shall we? Curious about why you are carrying my husband's last betrayal poisoned by Ladon, along with the little thief, away from my garden with such haste?" She stopped less than a meter from me, her eyes briefly leaving me in order to glance over my two companions, she didn't bother hiding her revulsion, even if the souring of her expression did nothing to damage her statuary beauty.

I nodded once more, still holding my tongue behind my teeth, afraid of my choice of words in case I were to answer. "I know there is

nothing here that belonged to my garden, that the missing apples have been eaten by those wretched nymphs while you three managed to distract Ladon, even if those little liars insisted on having eaten only one." She sniffed disdainfully.

"The Fates will have their hands full with you three, and since you didn't manage to steal anything, I'll let you three live, but I promise you, it will come a moment when each of you will think about this moment, and curse your survival." Her words weighed down on me like a bar of steel, making me strain my muscles to the tearing point in order to avoid falling from my seat and bowing my head.

"This is your only warning. Do not test me again." And once she said that, she was gone in a flash of golden light.

We landed without fuss, even if heavy rain started falling over us while a rich dumbass got his car stolen. I couldn't help but rage against the relatively brief but adrenaline-filled race towards the camp, the surprise visit from Hera having let me seething and almost frothing at the mouth. The slick road and slow mortals driving their cars forcing me to go slower than I'd have liked did not help the attempt to keep my cool.

We were a few minutes from Long Island when Luke stirred again. I had to restrain myself from punching him again, but if I had to be honest, I started to fear that the several hits to his head could end up giving him something worse than a concussion.

I had chucked him behind Thalia's seat, the knocked out mortal slumped in the trunk, and I adjusted the mirror in order to see his face while I was driving.

"The Oracle, what did it say when you left?" I asked when I saw him once more regain his senses. My tone was flat, and my eyes betrayed no emotions. Yet, it was very clear that I was more than simply pissed. He had charged against Ladon, turning him directly

against us, not leaving me the time to properly organize my thoughts nor allowing us to make some sort of plan.

However, between the likely dehydration, and the several hits to the head, the son of Hermes chose unconsciousness over answering my question.

Less than an hour later, when we came close to the Camp, I unbelted Thalia and started running, already knowing what was going to happen. My mind, once it made its way beyond my rage and frustration, analyzed the situation. *Too many coincidences. He chose to set out for this quest with only Thalia as his companion, ignoring my skill out of fear I'd seduce her. Luke loses his cool in the worst possible moment, I can't remember where I put my stuff in the Garden, wind opposes the airplane, and neither he nor I are healers, so we can't help Thalia on our own, while Hera jumps out of nowhere only to freak me out*

When a rumbling thunder echoed over my head I gritted my teeth. *And like hell this rain is natural.*

I had either forgotten or ignored that Fate was a thing in the reality I was living. I didn't know if there was some form of sabotage going on, or if the events simply fell on their own to match the situations that Riordan had written. Or maybe Fate was something else entirely, and my taxed mind was grasping straws.

The jet lag between San Francisco and New York was of three hours, meaning that, while we started our flight only a single hour after the sunset, we went towards the night, and as such, the relatively brief hike from the car to the camp was done into the darkness. The moon would have shone upon us, if not for the unnatural lightning storm that I felt *watching* us.

I parked and quickly left my seat, walking around the car and reaching Thalia, unlatching her seatbelt and carrying her as a potatoes sack over my right shoulder. Whatever ill effect the venom

was having on her, it wasn't something I could hold back carrying her gently. I left Luke in the car, he could sort himself out.

The rain was annoying and the wind kept buffeting me, choosing the worst possible moments to make me lose my balance, the wet grass sliding under my feet, pebbles, roots and *everything* under the sky seemed to exist only to hinder me. The little light the moon should have provided even though the cloudy sky seemed too shy to help me see the path, forcing me to follow my memory more than my eyes.

Thalia's weight was, almost unsurprisingly the less problematic challenge I was facing. Unsurprisingly because after the sky, finding in myself the strength for carrying the fourteen years old demigoddess was easy. Almost because I *really* didn't expect to feel the whole world act against me. I reached the summit of the small hill before the border of the Half-blood Camp, my legs burning too much for it to be caused only by muscular fatigue, and yet I endured. Step, after step, after step. I walked forward, shifting my weight in order for it to counter the winds, and in the flash of lightning, I suddenly recognized the Camp, I was on the right track, less than fifty meters from the border of the protections, which I could already see as a sort of shimmer through the pelting rain, noticeable only because I was extremely sensitive to magic.

I can make it.

Then my right foot slipped, my muscles seizing in a sudden cramp, forcing me to stumble forward. The slippery wet grass was waiting that moment to capitalize on my weakness, completing the work.

I fell forward, My arms naturally coming down to arrest my fall, and with the movement, Thalia, rolled off me and on the grass, crossing exactly the border with the camp.

In that moment, I got goosebumps, my skin tingled, hairs shooting straight up. I didn't hear it immediately, but I saw it.

In my head, there were a lot of facts about lightning: the bottom tip of a lightning bolt traveling from a cloud to the ground does travel rather quickly, although it travels at much less than the speed of light. A lightning discharge consists of electrons that have been stripped from their molecules flying through the air. They are accelerated by a strong electric field, a consequence of the big voltage difference between the cloud and the ground. They crash into air molecules on their way down and free other electrons, making a tube of ionized air. The "leader", the first stroke of a lightning discharge, actually proceeds in steps - lengthening by about 30 meters at a time, taking about a microsecond (one-millionth of a second) to do each step. There is a pause between steps of about 50 microseconds. The whole process may take a few milliseconds (one-thousandths of a second), providing enough time to perceive motion. Most of the charge flows after this leader makes electrical contact with the ground, however. A powerful "return stroke" releases much more energy. That's not the whole story, however, a lightning flash may have only one return stroke or may have several tens of strokes using the same column of ionized air.

And yet, whatever I saw broke every rule and fact I knew about natural phenomena. A single, straight, impossible lightning cut the sky open like a line drawn in white ink over black paper. Faster than it should have been possible, it came and went before my mind could properly register its presence.

It touched Thalia and there was a flash, that much I know and remember.

KRABOOM

I heard the thunder of the first strike from Zeus, and I saw the flash of a second one: following an instantaneous and violent gut feeling, I stabbed my knife in the dirt, before slamming myself flat against the ground.

The second lightning strike was much more physics friendly, it came down zig-zagging through the sky, choosing to strike the pommel of

my knife instead of me.

Then physics took a vacation, and an explosion turned everything black.

23 July 2000

The thrumming pain in my head was the reason I awoke. It wasn't nice.

It was downright awful.

Finding yourself in a place you can't immediately recognize would spook anyone, and for a second, I examined my surroundings looking for either an enemy or a weapon to use, before my brain actually kicked in and I recognized the Camp's infirmary.

Groggily, I rose from my seat and grabbed the clothes that had been thoughtfully placed on my bedrest. Living among demigods meant that short of a crippling injury or instantaneous death, between ambrosia and healing mumbo jumbo from either Chiron or Apollo's kids, mostly everyone survived pretty terrifying wounds.

Sure, at some point the demigods left the Camp and ended up killed, but hey, if you're over 18 years old nobody cares a rat's fart about your violent death.

Such was the beauty of the world I lived in.

I left the infirmary after having chugged down two gulps of nectar, I knowingly ignored the Lichtenberg figures on my arms caused by something that I didn't remember, and walked towards the boundary of the Camp, without bothering to recognize the campers' hellos or wary whispering. It was night, but since it was a stormless one, I suspected it had already been a day since the lightning.

I already knew what I would find, it didn't take any kind of stretch of the imagination to figure it out. Surprisingly enough, I wasn't grieving nor in apoplectic rage. But I was *pissed*.

The fact that such an event happened both in the books and in this reality hinted at something above me pulling the strings. *Plan A: Golden Fleece*. My mind shot forward considering the possibilities.

No, scratch that. Plan A: Hekate is the goddess of magic, involving her will cost me something, but 'she wants to see what I will do'. She should at least be interested. I shook briefly my head, starting the walk uphill towards what I really didn't want to check.

Plan B: complete the second project with David, then Golden Fleece.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm down, there was a problem, and I already had two possible solutions, it could be way worse. "Why there are so many people around after curfew?" I asked a random kid.

"Mr. D and Chiron have been summoned to Olympus, and everyone wanted to see Thalia's tree." he quickly answered before taking a wary step back when he saw my face contort itself in rage. *Thalia is not a martyr to be gawked at.*

When I recognized one of the demigods around the imposing pine tree, I grabbed the forefront of his shirt and held him less than a palm from my face: "The fucking oracle, what did it tell you for the quest?"

The son of Hermes looked at me with vacant eyes, a defeated expression he had no right to wear on his face.

"Not alone you'll go west,

Go fast, for there one will rest,

With a silent weeper, and the hungry thieves.

After the quest, a wordsmith grieves.

Two only will walk after the task

with direction the first, broken the last,

rooted the third, to not travel the world,

It's the price to pay for the broken vow." his voice reached everyone around the clearing, and the expression of many went from sad to... well, not enraged, but quite annoyed. Far from being complete idiots, they had likely followed my same interpretation of the last part, and being the reasonable cunts that weren't actually friends with Thalia, but were ready to enjoy every occasion to bashing someone else, they wasted no time in taking a collective step back from him.

I took another step in his direction, the frail control I had over my temper thinning even more: "And you chose to ask Thalia, the only one born under a broken vow on the Styx, as your only companion." while my voice remained quiet, I felt my face contort itself in abject fury: "Because you were jealous."

A part of me knew that he was a teen desperate for attention and with more than a few issues, I knew that he was a cardinal element of the world I was living into and that Fate had more than a veiled interest in him.

Too bad that I was fresh out of fucks to give.

"No! I wouldn't..." he stammered, his honest outrage hot enough to push him through his daze, but not enough to not be interrupted by me.

I desperately wanted to say something to *hurt* him, but there weren't words to express myself. I simply punched him.

Hard. My knuckles burying themselves into the pit of his stomach, causing him to bend forward, enough to meet my other hand, which

came in a downward haymaker that carried my intention of punting him into the ground.

Which kind of idiot asks for a prophecy and doesn't try to figure it out before going on the fucking adventure? But then, if one can ignore a prophecy, is it even valid?

My mind went through those options without my consent nor attention, which was focused on the son of Hermes, and I looked almost like a passenger on my body as my right hand clasped the forefront of his shirt and held him close enough for my forehead to crash against his nose. After that my rage was... gone. Maybe I just recognized the futility of manhandling Luke. *It won't help Thalia.*

I glared at the back of two sons of Hermes that came to drag away his slumped form but didn't stop them.

"I may have a way to heal Thalia." I said loud enough to be heard by the ones around me: "If it doesn't work, I'll need fifteen voluntaries for plan B. I'll choose who, my team, my rules."

I turned to go away only to come immediately to a full stop: less than five meters from me there was a shriveled-up mummy of an old lady in a tie-dyed hippie dress. I remembered and heard enough to know that this was the infamous Oracle, the same one that sprouted the bullshit prophecy that fucked with Luke's head enough to make him not think clearly. Be it deliberate or not, the act of telling the future had been instrumental in shaping the events.

The raspy whispers that came with her sudden intake of breath remembered me of the sheer *wrongness* that Fate was. It was unavoidable, the ultimate cage. **I am free.**

I didn't think, didn't plan, I reacted: with two steps I was in front of the Oracle.

"The price to be paid for the broken vow, uh?" I hissed, less than an inch from its face: "Look closely into your future little Oracle, and tell

me, what will happen if I hear a *single word* leave your wrinkled mouth?"

The rasping breath deepened, and whatever sort of fake life the mummy seemed to hold, it seemed to no longer want it, because it started to talk: "*Change...*"

As soon as I heard the word, I slammed my foot on its stomach, hurling back the talking corpse and following in pursuit. I was *done with* the shit Fate was throwing around.

I was about to bury my punch into his head when I felt a sudden spike of *danger* coming from my side. I turned my punch into a fast roll over the damp grass, and in a fraction of second, I was jumping on a new trajectory, narrowly avoiding what felt like a streak of pale moonlight.

When I righted myself, I stared at my aggressor: female, beautiful, coppery colored skin and dark eyes, a silver circlet braided into the top of her long dark hair. And more importantly, a silvery arrow ready to be unleashed.

I stilled, she was far from being a mediocre archer, and I would have a single opportunity to attack. I studied carefully my opponent, taking notice of how two of the campers were suddenly holding their knives in threatening motions against other girls with silvery arrows, while the other demigods had suddenly taken several steps back from the confrontation, and were running around like headless chickens: "Someone call the Cabins' Heads!" and other such tripe.

I kept my attention on my opponent: "Any reason why you thought attacking me was a good idea?" I asked sardonically, Mist rolling over the area and slowly creeping up the girls I had never seen before.

"You dare touch what is beyond your station. The Oracle is under the protection of Akesios." her voice rippled through the air, managing to express her outrage and disgust for my action, along with the

contempt I was held in. My mind quickly recognized one of the surnames of Apollo, under which he was worshipped in Elis, where he had a splendid temple in the agora. That surname, which has the same meaning as akestôr and alexikakos, characterized the god as the averter of evil, in particular, the young woman tried to associate the prophecies given by the Oracle to the 'averting of evil'. From the way she held herself, I had no doubt it was done knowingly.

"The sun isn't up, what's it to you?" I seethed. I decided that prophecies were better not heard, and like hell I was going to listen to a single word.

"My Lady wouldn't allow it." she quietly answered, her arms unwavering despite the tension she was applying to her weapon.

I snorted, once more observing her features: "I couldn't care less about your lady, who are *you* to stay in my way?"

"I am Zoe Nightshade, Lieutenant of the Hunt, and I will defend the Oracle from the brutality of men." she proudly stated.

I didn't bother holding back a sigh, this brought feminism to a whole new level of idiocy. *I'm all for equality, but only because the Oracle's body was one of woman, she could sprout prophecies that had as the only effect one of the disturbing mental processes enough to turn a quest that could have gone smoothly in the clusterfuck it became. All without consequences? I don't think so.*

"I did warn the Oracle to keep her forked tongue behind her teeth. She ignored my prophecy, she pays the price, much like Luke did with hers." I rolled my shoulders, noticing with a frown that the Mist couldn't overcome the moonlight.

"You dare?" she hissed, the sheer outrage that emanated from her form was almost visible to the naked eye.

At that I laughed, my burning hot rage turning into something cold and calculative: "You'd be surprised by what I dare accomplish, little

nymph. Lipari is right, you *are* self-entitled."

I had no qualms about revealing my presence in the garden since Hera already knew, and while the only time I ever spoke about zoe was with Atlas, I had no intention of revealing that tidbit of information. *What did **Atlas** say?*

'it hurt me discovering that one of them betrayed her family, forsaking her own name.'

She recoiled as if I had struck her, and at that moment I shot forward, swerving right to avoid another streak of pale moonlight and clamping my hands upon her wrists. "You think you are above consequences because you slave away your name under the Apanchomenê?"

When she heard how I had called Artemis, it was like all her strength had bled out.

"Apancho-what?" asked a child of Atena that didn't know what do to stop the situation from escalating, but couldn't resist the opportunity to learn something new.

I tilted my head questioningly, dropping Zoe's wrists and turning around to notice that the tensions between the two demigods and the two huntresses had somehow deflated when Zoe didn't fight back. "The Oracle used words and fucked us over, you defended it in your Lady's name, so let me use words to make you reap what you sowed." I sported a bloodthirsty grin, finding a better way to get revenge over the huntress stopping me from destroying the Oracle.

With a wide gesture of my hands, I started telling a story: "In the neighborhood of the town of Caphyae in Areadia, in a place called Condylea, there was a sacred grove of Artemis Condyleatis. On one occasion when some boys were playing in this grove, they put a string round the goddess' statue, and said in their jokes they would strangle Artemis. Some of the inhabitants of Caphyae who found the boys thus engaged in their sport, stoned them to death."

I turned slowly on myself, noting that everyone around me, even the other two huntresses, was waiting for me to complete the story: "Even with the guilty stoned to death, She of The Wild is the goddess of the hunt, the moon, and chastity. And since she helped her mother give birth to her twin, she is also the goddess of childbirth. After the offense given by the boys, all the women of Caphyae had premature births, and all the children were brought dead into the world."

I looked again at the Lieutenant of the Hunt: "This calamity did not cease until the boys were honorably buried, and an annual sacrifice to their manes was instituted in accordance with the command of an oracle of Apollo. The surname of Condyleatis was then changed into Apanchomene."

Everyone was holding their breath, waiting for a rebuttal from Zoe, or a divine punishment from the heavens, I didn't know nor care, I snorted derisively one last time and turned my back on her looking at the Athena's son who had asked for an explanation.

"If you are one of the people in charge of teaching mythology to the newcomers, it's no wonder that everyone only dreams of quests and being claimed." I shook my head, letting the action express what I thought of the situation, and left the area, there was nothing more to be said.

After the less than flattering first meeting with a member of the Hunt, I dragged myself back to the special three-way crossroad, taking the fourth path and walking back to my abode. I felt... spent. More for my confrontation against the Hunters than for the lack of sleep. *Sure, seeing Thalia being hit by a bolt of lightning and becoming a fucking tree less than 10 minutes from a healer hasn't done me any favors.*

I eyed critically my home: I had managed to greatly improve it, it actually resembled a proper hut: I had placed straight wooden poles in two concentric circles, and filled the space between with sacks of

sand. It wasn't much, but it worked. The roof was an oblique plane made with planks of wood, and the door...

Well, I've never been a carpenter. I somewhat consoled myself, looking dejectedly at a wooden door held in place by rocks.

I entered my frankly horrible hut, eager to sleep in the hammock I had tied inside. *The summer is hot enough that I don't need to lit up the brazier.* I was sighing in relief while taking the first step inside when I tripped and fell.

"What the fuck?" I exclaimed, a mix of surprise and irritation coloring my voice.

Looking on the ground, my eyes quickly found the reason behind my fall: a freshly pruned tree branch, and a very familiar one. At its side, a jute sack wrapped in a black band with 'HERMES EXPRESS' printed in gold over it.

Without thinking, but with a growing hope that was quickly turned into certainty, flashes of what I had forgotten blossoming in my mind.

I awoke under a column of sky held by Atlas with my body screaming abuse. I realized that for Ouranos I was unworthy of attention he didn't hate me, nor my shoulders for holding him, but it was clear that he despised every one of my muscles equally. I could feel my tendons grinding together, my joints locked and stiff, and even my heart was beating erratically. "You held the sky for a whole night." Atlas rumbled, his voice wavering between amusement and respect "Your will matched mine, but your body is without a doubt mortal, consequences are your curse." I squinted my eyes at him, focusing on his words, dissecting them for hidden meanings. Anything but acknowledging my body's outraged screams. I was thinking of an appropriately prideful answer when everything faded to black.

When I came back to my senses, I saw that the sun had long since started his path towards the west and that I had an hour or two at

most before the dusk.

Forcing my body to obey, I rolled on my stomach, scrambling to get my legs under me. "I have to admit," I spoke, marveling at the gravely and scratchy sound that left my mouth, "That it's been far more than simply interesting."

The low rumble of rocks falling one over another was the amused chuckle of the Titan made me look at his amused expression: "What is your name, mortal?" he asked.

I tilted my head, considering his request. It would have been fair answering truthfully, after all I knew the titan. And sooner or later, a monster or resentful demigod would give my name to the son of Gea. Or at least, he would find out once the Titan War started.

Still, keeping the cards close to my chest was a smart move.

But I liked Atlas. And frankly, after the freak out I had pushed him through, I doubted he could divine any deeper understanding of me from my name. Sure, the simple act of answering or not would have given him an in into my personality. And even the long minutes I was spending analyzing the situation was telling him about my natural carefulness.

Oh, fuck it, what's the point of being alive if you never risk anything? I asked to myself.

"I was named Icarus." I smiled winningly at the Titan. I didn't tell him it was my name, nor that it wasn't.

"Icarus." he repeated, "I can see the similarities with your predecessor, even if you seem to have what it takes to back up your excessive daring. I'll remember this name."

I frowned at his answer. Why every chat with an immortal turns out to be a game I don't know the rules of? I wondered.

"How would you know about the first Icarus? He came after your time." I asked, slowly limping towards the backpack that I had discarded against a rock.

"The Hours are chatty, as are the Winds, even the Stars echo what they find interesting." was his totally-not-obscure answer.

I popped a small cube of ambrosia in my mouth, relishing in the warmth that soothed my abused muscles, untying knots, and relaxing my shoulders. "Another mystery for me, uh?"

I dragged out of my backpack the project David had cursed me for: celestial bronze, of a rectangular shape, 70x25x15 centimeters, and was covered in greek letters which could slide on several tracks.

"Are you familiar with mortals' music?" I asked, pressing an Alpha letter that acted like an on-off button.

Keith Jarreth's piano music started to play around the relatively small plateau at the top of Mount Othrys, and I was happy to see the dumbfounded expression on Atlas' face.

"I am not." He replied, clearly torn between confusion and curiosity: "I didn't hear anything about music since Orpheus managed to undo Tanathos' work."

At which I frowned: "I thought that he was the peaceful aspect of death, Atropos is the sudden one."

The titan grinned, his eyes never leaving the over-glorified jukebox I had David build. "My mistake then." He corrected himself, but his shit-eating grin told me that there was something else at work in his words.

I let my fingers trail over the celestial bronze jukebox until I found a circular section, which I turned this and that way until I was satisfied.

"I set it so that it will play from dawn to dusk." I told the titan distractedly, walking over the branch he had clearly ripped from the golden apple tree and bringing out my trusty, multi-purpose knife.

Going around with it is a must, but it's hardly manageable. I commented by myself, my eyes landing briefly over the round mounds hid by the jute sack. I didn't want to test myself so soon with six Immortality Apples.

"You would have me listen to mortal music, Icarus." Atlas accused me.

I didn't know if his use of my name should have made me feel something, but I couldn't discern any kind of magic suddenly moving around me, so I ignored it. "I would have you learn a bit of what humans have made since you have been tasked with holding the sky, yes."

Atlas was too prideful to ask why, and I wouldn't have answered him anyway. Music, along with the other Arts, was simply a branch of mankind's skills that best expressed our creativity and dreams. Maybe it would be enough to not have him join into Kronos' crusade, or at least to make Atlas spare some humans out of curiosity in case the Titan War was lost. Frankly, it was my reserve plan in case everything went to shit due to my presence in that reality. Well, more hope of a miracle than a plan, if Kronos wins, I'll have other shit to care about instead of preserving human culture. I amended in my mind.

Watching the slow descent of the sun, I knew that I was short of time if I wanted to enter the garden of dusk. How to get the nymphs to not call on Ladon once I am inside? I wondered while carefully pruning the branch and setting aside both twigs and leaves.

Corrupting them with an apple. Was the immediate answer.

But how do I make sure they don't steal my shit until I leave with Thalia and Luke once they join me? My mind outlined for me the

next problem.

My eyes fell on the canteen still full of Dionysus' brand of wine and a smirk blossomed on my face, a plan starting to take form in my devilishly twisted mind.

Bribery with an apple, getting wasted with the wine. *I reassumed the general lines.* Now, how to keep them away from my loot?

Minutes later, when the magic jukebox had left classical music behind only to jump to hip hop, the solution jumped to the forefront of my mind. Didn't Hermes have a Fed-Ex jig going on?

I opened the jute sack and watched inside with a shadow of satisfaction worming its way on my face. Thalia's situation had been a hit, but one I knew how to fix, more or less. Finding out that my trip ended up with a sound success was a gladly received surprise.

Above the golden loot, there was a square piece of paper, folded like a couple of snakes spiraling around each other. *Which is impossible, it doesn't matter how good you are with origami.*

I frowned and picked up the strange 3-D construct, which unfurled on its own, revealing a message written in ancient greek: *I took the drachmas for the expedition, and a single apple to keep the transaction off the books. Well played, but I allowed you to use my godly services to secure your loot only because you are one of my favorite thieves. It won't happen again!*

(Unless you keep 'tipping' so awesomely!)

Safe Travels!

-Hermes

My mind went blank for several seconds.

Safe Travels. I read it again. *Why does it feel like he knew I would Travel? It could pass as a reference to his realm, but its annoyingly convenient...*

"What do I do with four of one of the most sought after prizes in the world?" I muttered to myself, pushing the thought of Hermes' message to the back of my mind. For a second, I felt like at the end of an RPG game, at the point where you have just so much gold and artifacts that you couldn't use them all even if you wanted to. Then I remembered that Plan A required Hekate assistance, and I knew what I needed to do.

Golden apples of immortality are hardly going to rot. I mused silently, letting my newfound sensibility towards magical flora wash over my treasure: I had to forcibly snap my eyes closed in order to stop myself from gobbling down the golden fruits. Their *presence* was... unique. In the garden, they were subdued, in the same way, a single voice in a choir was hard to pick up, but here? It was like hearing a constant humming just beyond my line of sight, a whisper of a promise that was not uttered out loud. The image of the sand stopping its flow inside of an hourglass, and the song of eons passing leaving the one to eat one apple undisturbed.

I felt around the four blazing presences that the apples were, taking notice about how unquestioningly *alive* they felt, and my senses fell to the pruned branch from which they had been picked. It was... *waiting?* For what, I had no idea.

With a sigh, I reached my hammock and collapsed into it, Hermes letter clutched into my hand, thinking about the implications. In the books, Thalia had been turned into a tree. Now, she had become a tree once more, and again, before she could hit 16 years of age, so the big ass prophecy was not triggered. And it was clear that Artemis' hunters had been asked to recruit Thalia and Bianca in the books, exactly for the purpose of delaying the prophecy.

I frowned, instinctively disliking that Hermes or anyone knew what I was going to do before me. *How do I solve the problem?*

My first plan of action was in my opinion reasonable: finish the ship I had asked David to craft, man it, and sail to find the Golden Fleece. There was no reason to invent again the wheel, after all, it healed Thalia the first time, it could do it again. And while grabbing the ten years old Percy Jackson was tempting if only to keep the sea complacent towards us during our travel, I knew that plot armor extended itself only to the characters with an extremely meaningful connection with the main character, which was something I had neither the patience nor the inclination to cultivate. *Hades, I barely manage to behave like a functional human with Thalia and Luke, and they basically raised themselves fighting monsters, a coddled ten years old would bring me to make human offerings again.*

But the problem was another: *How do I make sure Thalia isn't forcibly turned into a slave for a stuck up, weak-willed goddess or metamorphosized into another tree just because Zeus is a dumbass?*

I fell asleep pondering my options.

The night was quiet and without wind, the only sound that could be heard over the bristling of the flames in the brazier was the low echo of the waves, just beyond the trees. The new moon gave only a dim light, but in the cloudless sky, it almost resembled a bloodthirsty grin, while the shadows in the clearing twisted and rolled one over another. It took me weeks to figure out how to call Hekate, and in all that time I dedicated myself to push forward the project I had going on with David: building a fucking ship.

I cut my palm with a switchblade, letting enough of my blood to fill the cup I was making with my hand, and tossed it into the fire, the memory of my mother clear in my mind.

"Hekate." I called, "Mother, I have a bargain for you." *Magic has a price has it not? Let's see if it holds true for the goddess of magic.*

The fire flickered, before turning silver, with an eerie howling, which had nothing to do with wolves and wind, and was more resembling of a door opening and suddenly allowing a current of air to pass through. And out of a door that I couldn't see, my mother walked into the clearing.

She was the same as the last time I had seen her, only, she was sporting a smile that I could have mistaken for a strange mixture of pride and motherly affection.

It really had no place on the face of the goddess who, from what I could discern, had ripped my soul from its previous existence and chucked it into a bastard that she had for shit and giggles.

She tilted her head questioningly while walking forward, her hand trailing gently across my cheek: "Normally I wouldn't have answered, and if any mortal dared call me and actually expect me to come would be punished for his daring."

Her hand came to rest on my neck, and when I felt her rest her dainty fingers on the sides of my throat to squeeze lightly, I found myself unable to move.

"Heal Thalia." I asked.

She chuckled, shaking her head in a slow and almost gentle denial: "No can do, the King turned her, and even if I were amenable to go against his wishes, Ladon's venom is not something a mortal can be healed from. Even a demigod of the Big Three."

"What do you know about the divine properties of demigods?" she suddenly asked, forcing me to raise an eyebrow in mock outrage.

A test, really? I rolled my eyes: "Each demigod can operate in the realm of his divine parent, the extent of his powers, or better yet, the extent of his influence over his godly parent's realm is limited by either the relationship with the said parent or the... strength, I guess, of the demigod."

And while I was saying it, I frowned: "Well, that's not exact, is not about strength, but about the... *assertiveness*? Strength of character? Will? Understanding of said domain?"

"Your observations are vague to the point that they almost sound incorrect, darling." Hekate chastized me: "But I shall enlighten you: " she raised a torch while saying that, the fire on it blazing silver and light filling the clearing for a brief instant.

"The right to manipulate your divine parent's domain is bestowed upon conception and cannot be taken back. Sure, if I were cross with you, my dear Icarus, you would find the Mist extremely uncooperative."

My eyes narrowed: "You like me." I accused her, "That's why my illusions sometimes act without the need for explicit instructions on my part."

The goddess grinned: "Yes, well done spotting it. But its also due to your upbringing, your familiarity with my domain is, after all, an important factor."

"Does it means I could call upon storm and earthquakes?" I asked, eager for an answer.

"Do not make questions you already now the answer of." she chided me.

I raised my hands and drew small circles on my temples: "The Big Three, along with their sisters... what is the difference between them and the other gods?"

"Being children of the Titan of Time is surely a factor, that defines the... let's say hierarchy, he was the previous Ruler and the one to organize the demise of his father. But the nature of their domain is far more relevant. Think Icarus, the sky, the sea, the underworld, what do they have in common?"

"They were beyond terrifying to humans, back during ancient Greece golden age, I swear." I instinctively answered, "Or at least the ones that raised the more questions: mankind had always stared in wonder at the sky, wondered about the meaning of death, and was awed or terrified by the sea, obsessing on what existed beyond the horizon."

My... *mother*, smiled mysteriously, not explaining further.

"So... I cannot summon earthquakes and hurricanes?." I frowned.

"You did admirably in your challenges, why would you look into your father's side of the family?" she asked sardonically, giving me pause.

"What happened to 'Do not make questions you already know the answer for' ?" I half-heartedly protested.

"You are the one who called me here, entertaining me is the least you can do." A delicate eyebrow rose on her forehead.

"First: there is no way in Hades that you chose randomly the father for the body you chucked my soul into." I raised a finger, as I was counting: "Second: Thalia was unstoppable, she didn't get tired until we were out of danger, and she doesn't have to think about her power as I do, she kept us alive without any extraordinary grasp of her divine side. Third: I use every tool I can, it's a matter of principle."

"Well argued dear." she said, resuming her walk around me, "But as you are beginning to learn, actions have consequences, and everything has a price, but I need to hear what you're looking for if you're seeking my counsel."

"What do I have to do to gain over Poseidon's realm the same birthright Thalia has over her father's domain?" I asked clearly, my chin rising a bit as if I was challenging her.

"You would need to do stuff you can't hope to survive, I, however... With apples from the Queen's garden, I could make it work." She

tilted her head expectantly.

"Apples? As in, more than one?" I asked.

"Don't be deliberately obtuse dear, there is a reason why Heracles had been tasked with plucking three." she started walking around me like some kind of predator eyeing its next meal.

Saying that it unnerved me was redundant. "Three apples to gain over Poseidon's realm the same birthright Thalia has over her father's domain." I repeated, carefully avoiding using Poseidon's name but making sure she wouldn't give me the power of someone else's grandfather.

"Indeed, one for me to set things in motion and kept the whole thing hidden, one for another who will need to help to pull a certain string, and one spent to... well, you don't have the frame of reference to understand what I'll do with it." She explained, making me only more suspicious.

"You are unnervingly talkative and informative about this matter, while obviously hiding something. Any reason why?" Not knowing what actually was going to be done with my prize greatly unnerved me.

She sauntered towards me and placed her hands on my shoulders, her torches floating quietly at her sides: "Oh, dearie, haven't we already had this conversation? You are my masterpiece, I want to see what kind of things you can accomplish, besides, giving the payment, it's only fair that I explain, but magic is a mystery, so I can't tell you everything."

"Those three apples are an awfully high price to pay without knowing what they will be used for..." I objected half-heartedly.

"When the price is paid, your claim can gain... weight, but you'll take something not meant for you, cabin 11 influence over you is clear." she started, before lightly shaking her head: "Dearie, this isn't like a

professor of mathematics teaching you something too advanced for you to understand, it's like a dragon teaching a stone how to fly."

I slowly handed over a small sack with three apples: "There you go, *mother*." I noted with a sarcastic tint to my voice.

She grinned to me almost impishly: "Don't be sad for the loss of your treasure, even if greed suits you, apples cannot stay among mortals. Even the last time, they couldn't remain with Eurystheus. After all the trouble Hercules went through to get them, he had to return them to the goddess Council, who took them back to the garden that was then at the northern edge of the world."

I sighed: "I already gave you my apples, mother."

"That you did. However, certain conditions are to be met before your request can be executed." Hekate answered, looking amused.

"Conditions?" I said with a low growl.

"You'll feel the difference once I'll be done with my part, but from there on you'll have to... oh, you'll find out." And with a mad cackle, my mother vanished in a flash of silvery fire that gave off the impression of moonlight.

Adamas

13 September 2000

The sun glared harshly enough to be felt even under the wide straw hat I was wearing and flashed my eyes even when hidden under my sunglasses. Not that I ever faced the sun, these days, but its reflection on the sea was enough to transmit the dislike of Apollo. Since our return, I had taken to spend some time among the other demigods, looking for who I'd want on my mission to recover the Golden Fleece. I already had a vague outline of who I'd want to cover this or that role, but that was a hazy approximation of a plan. I didn't have plot armor, that meant that death was a quite real possibility, and as such I wanted capable people to sail with me. More than that, I wanted people sure of themselves, I couldn't waste time to check over their insecurities while we were all risking our lives. Since my meeting with Hekate, I had managed to find out the names of who I wanted with me, setting up opportune roles and a rough chain of command. Sadly, I needed one satyr to come with me.

"Yes, hitting the Oracle wasn't the wisest thing you could do." a familiar voice interrupted my considerations.

I turned to my left, leaving the light breeze to carry saltwater over me with the next wave. I chose to not answer to what was clearly an attempt to get a rise out of me, returning to look at the sea. Even if Dionysus was much better than what he looked like the first time we met, he was a far cry from being beautiful, and so the sight of the waves was a far more soothing sight. "Prophecies are either true, and so they happen in any case, or they are false, and useless in the first place." I shrugged, it was a good justification in my head, it even sounded like it made sense.

"Spare me your false reasoning, we both know that you did it because you *could*. Nothing more, nothing less." the plump god

snorted, a can of diet coke appearing in his hand.

"Are you going to admonish me? Two months after the fact?" I snorted in turn, rummaging into my ice-filled sack and picking out a bottle of beer, just to spite the god.

Dionysus laughed: "Ha! Absolutely not! You managed to get away with a major offense while we Olympians were busy questioning Chiron about the recent events! And only because the sun was already down, had you tried your stunt during the day, Camp or not Camp you would have been burned to a crisp." the god took a deep gulp from the coke, while I got around to uncork mine, "And *nobody* has ever dared to hit the Oracle! After taunting it with a treath too! As soon as its patron had been informed by his twin about the events, I laughed so hard I cried!"

He gestured wildly, tossing away his empty can that dissolved itself in motes of blue light: "And you managed to avoid arrows from the Lieutenant of the Hunt, while bitchslapping around respect and reverence with stories so old we all had forgotten! The god of war was almost dancing a jig, while the blond bimbo was gushing about your just rage caused by the Fates meddling with my mortal sister's love! Ahahahah! Oh, the face of the Queen, she was conflicted between her dislike of the twins and her spite of you! This has been the most interesting meeting since the one of the Winter Solstice in 1773, when we discussed the Boston Tea Party!"

I looked back at the god, finding his amusement contagious, and, remembering I had an open beer in my hand, I tilted it in order to spill it on the ground: "For Dionysus." I intoned briefly.

Before the liquid could touch the sand, a purple fire blossomed over the ground, greedily drinking the alcoholic beverage.

I then brought the bottle to my lips a drank a bit, looking sideways at the relaxed expression on the god's face.

Choosing that there wouldn't be a better moment to ask, I opened my mouth and spoke: "At the Camp, is there a satyr with searcher's license to look for Pan? Someone not stuck up?"

Dionysus turned towards me, and I removed my sunglasses, staring back into his violet eyes: "I'm guessing you want one for your unsanctioned quest."

I shook my head: "Not a quest, it's not done for the gods, but for Thalia. Looking for something that can help her will bring us here and there, a satyr could use a group of demigods as an escort while looking around. And if he succeeds, we'll might gain help from Pan himself." I explained, "It's a win for everyone."

The god of ritual madness rose a single eyebrow in my direction, clearly not believing my words for a single instant, but he shrugged nonetheless: "I'll send you someone, Icarus."

I nodded and started to leave the beach when he called me back: "Your name has changed. It's subtle, but not something those who are familiar with you will miss."

I stared back unblinkingly, I wasn't going to talk about the events that led me to that change, it was personal. Dionysus didn't look bothered by my reticence and dismissed me with a gesture of his hands along with suitably foreboding words: "Be careful to not rise too high too fast, we wouldn't want a repeat of your predecessor's feat, would we?"

That night I left my hut and went back to the common grounds of the camp, Mist cloaking me from whatever was in charge of enforcing the curfew. Luckily enough, the full moon spared me the need of using a flashlight to go around.

I took a spear from a rack, preferring it to the sword, and twirled thoughtfully between my hands. I was still looking for a way to use the branch from the golden apple tree, I frankly needed a

superweapon. Something like Thalia's spear, or Anaklusmos. With some magic to it. Objectively, it needed to be something that could help me both with the sea and with magic itself. I didn't want to stunt my growth in one direction or another oy because I was hasty into building the weapon. Frankly, something *à la* Whitebeard from one piece sounded cool, but pragmatism held me back.

I sighed: "Going around with it would be unwise anyway." For the time being, it was better to avoid Hera in any possible way.

When I turned once more on my self, simulating an upside swing while holding the bottom of the spear, greatly enhancing my reach, I froze: sitting on one of the benches on one side of the arena, there was a little girl. A silvery chiton that seemed woven from moonlight and water, auburn-hair, and a silver bow held gracefully in her lap. She clearly didn't need an introduction, also because she managed to arrive and sit down less than twenty meters from me without stumbling into the Mist.

I stared at her, inside of the Camp, gods could not directly act on demigods, I was sure of it. Appearances and chats were possible, even if barely tolerated by Zeus, threatening me looked like a big yes on the King's book.

I stared unblinkingly into her eyes, the 20 meters between us somehow insufficient to make such a thing impossible, and remained quiet, only quirking an eyebrow. She had been the one to initiate the contact, she would need to start the conversation. I refused to greet her or to show anything but diffidence: I owed her nothing, and frankly, anything that kept girls from becoming lustful women was on my bad side. It was the principle of the thing. The exaltation of maidens' purity was a must in every society, after all harlots and sluts needed to be shamed in order to exalt the righteousness of marriage: it was the cornerstone for a family, which was the basis of a clan, upon that was built a population large enough to count as people. With it came the concept of nation.

Historically speaking, every human society had a single man-woman couple as its starting point. Such a cornerstone couldn't exist while extramarital sex was considered acceptable for everyone.

The important thing, at the end of the day, was that authority of some sort was needed to legitimize a couple, because said authority would then act in what appeared to be the benefit of said couple while husband and wife recognized the necessity of said authority, perpetuating the idea to the offspring.

"You assaulted my Lieutenant." the crystalline voice of the goddess stopped my pondering human nature and brought me back to the present.

"I defended myself. She shot me twice before I even touched her." I answered without lying.

Artemis rose from her seat, the bow held in her hand with the bare minimum strength required for not letting it fall: "You assaulted my brother's Oracle. A gift to mortals so that they can prepare better to weather the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

Hamlet, really? I blinked: "Fortune-telling didn't help Macbeth." I tilted my head, following her lead on Shakespeare, before returning on more familiar ground: "Nor did Thetis' words help Achilles, or the Oracle' ones save Thalia. It's clear to me that whatever you think oracles and prophecies are, they do not help my fellow mortals."

I rolled my shoulders and kept practicing, ignoring the goddess. Ares, Aphrodite, and Dionysus didn't dislike me, at least from what the latter's words on the last Council had been; to compensate, Apollo and Artemis, along with Hera, actively disliked me. But... Hera disliked everyone. So it was a non-issue, and it wasn't like I could do something to appease the other two. Not that I felt like it.

Artemis didn't react to my disrespect, but I realized it wasn't... *safe*. She had the calm of the hunter stalking his prey, and I didn't appreciate being on the receiving end of her gaze. *How to redirect*

what I feel is going to be a metamorphosis followed by a merciless hunt? It wouldn't happen now, but having her stalking me once I left the camp was... kind of scary.

I made a show of looking at the sky, easily finding the Ursa constellation: "What do you want, Huntress?" I asked to buy time. She didn't answer, walking closer, her feet not making a sound when they touched the ground.

She came less than a meter from me, and even if she was in a body barely 4 and a half feet tall, it felt like the Moon was about to fall on me, an arrow about to slid between my ribs to find my heart. **I am free.**

I blinked, and the intimidation the goddess tried to wield upon me was shredded and dispersed with the same ease a bullet would tear through a spiderweb. I refrained from snorting, I was aware that whatever confrontation I chose to push right now would end up badly.

So I redirected: "Have you heard of Pan recently?"

She took a step back, her attention splitting between me and the subject of my question: "An unusual question to make, in an even unusual situation."

She walked around me, her eyes analyzing the signs left on the sandy ground without needing her input: "I met a fox once, extremely cunning, he knew he wasn't the predator, and he knew he couldn't scare me away. So he ran, in larger and larger circles, before pretending to be dead once he crossed the trail of a pack of wolves."

"Sounds like the Teumessian Fox." I said as an avenue of conversation.

Artemis took a step back, as the surprise hit her almost like a physical blow: "The Canis Minor *does* shine upon you. Be careful, mortal, find Pan, and I won't hunt you."

She turned like she was about to run away in the night when my words stopped her: "You don't feel it? The Reef will die in less than 20 years, primeval forests are getting smaller and smaller, unexplored caves are being mapped, every peak has been flagged, every valley walked, roads and rails will grow like cancer over the vast Eastern plains, beasts and plants are going extinct in droves. If Pan wanted to be found, or was around to be found, he would have already been."

The goddess's eyes flashed silver: "I will not oppose your Travel, but only if you look for Pan. If you find him, I won't hunt you for touching my Lieutenant."

While she almost presented it as a bargain, it was clear that it wasn't, not really. *I guess that consequences come with being free and the choices it entails.* I sighed, my very complex and self-imposed mission had just turned more difficult.

17 September 2000

Like I did only twice before, I sat at the hearth, staring not at the almost cold-but-never-dead-embers, but at the little girl intent to taking care of them. "So..." I trailed "Have you heard?"

Hestia rose an unimpressed eyebrow, and I grinned sheepishly: "Right, you hear everything. Your thoughts about my recent exploits?"

"I knew Dedalus, like I've always known and will always know every familial love. He loved Icarus, and was loved back. But the son felt like he was a candle born from the sun, and when he found he could fly higher than his father, he kept going until he fell, to show Dedalus that he was worthy of being his son." She poked at the embers with a stick covered in soot.

I watched as her hand buried herself into the hearth and came out with a blazing ember clutched in it: "You are bringing with you an

important part of the Family, place a brazier in the galley, and use this ember to light it up."

I looked at her with surprise on my features: "A fire on a boat made of wood? That's a bad..." I stopped when I noticed that there was no smoke rising from the glowing ember, and looked up to find Hestia's smirk while she placed it slowly in my palm and delicately closed my fingers over it, it was warm, but not overly so, it was like a gentle caress or a hug. I sighed, of all the gods, Hestia was the less malicious one, and given the vibe of the ember, the one I was more willing to listen. So, with the ember in my hand, I walked back to my hut, where I packed my stuff as neatly as I could and dismantled my brazier. The kitchen on board of the ship had carefully avoided a gas flame, David wisely ordering the cookers to be electrical, so we weren't equipped with free fire risking to kill us all.

Three hours later, I left my hut and walked back to the camp, the belongings I chose to bring with me were in a sack slung over my shoulder, with my bronze brazier clattering loudly behind me in the leather harness I had put together.

Once I reached the docking we had built only to be able to set off with our ship, I took a moment to admire it. It was made out of wood we lumbered from the forest we trained in. Everything had been hand made, from the shelves to the masts, from the engines, to the oars. The circuits had been bought, clearly, but the machinery in itself had been hardwired by Aephestus' kids. I looked at the sturdy but sleek vessel, the two masts held black sails, which were fucking cool, the bronze lined portholes shined brightly under the morning sun. The figurehead was a grinning fox exquisitely crafted, and while the name Argo II sounded unoriginal to me, I couldn't exactly oppose it publicly without telling everyone that it was dumb, calling on me further negative attention from Olympus.

I climbed up to the side of the ship after having hurled up the brazier and my sack, Hestia's ember still held in my hand, its warmth was soothing. Hydroponics cultures were set up under the glass portion of the deck, we didn't know how long we would stay away after all,

while solar panels were set up everywhere we could, a collaboration between David and his beloved, which coincidentally was a daughter of Apollo.

Less than an hour later, a sack landed on the deck, signalling that my crew had started to gather. Soon we would depart.

An hour later, I called name after name, checking for freeloaders or fuckers of any kind: "David, son of Aephestus."

When the man came forward from the small crowd on the deck, I nodded appreciatively: "He's head engineer and First Mate, if I'm not around, you'll answer to him."

When he disappeared inside the hull, I continued: "Jillian, daughter of Atena, she's the second mate, third in the chain of command." I winked at the blond girl with a serious expression, while my eyes ran over her form without my input.

"Hailey, daughter of Hermes: third mate." I stated clearly, and a seventeen yers old girl came forward, she was on the petite side, and a sneaky one, but trustworthy nonetheless.

So I went on calling the members of yhe crew, assigning roles so that everyone knew that the others weren't left without stuff to do. A single daughter of Aphrodite named Evelyn was followed by three people from Ares' Cabin: Eric, Emily and Charlotte. Abigail was instead our Head Healer, from the cabin of Apollo, along with her sister Sofia who was going to take turns with her in the infirmary.

I chose to bring two daughters of Apollo not only for the healing role, which was important, but also because the last time someone disrespected the God of the Golden Charriot, it was when the Greeks pillaged and burned his temple during Troy's war, and he had reacted with the Black Death. Since I was about to leave the Camp after having kicked his Oracle, I wanted someone on board that would make the prideful god stop from simply burning us to crisps.

Madison was a daughter of Aephestus, another engineer of sorts, while Hannah, daughter of Demeter, was in charge of the Hydroponics. Julia was a daughter of Athena, who shared her sister's grey eyes and blond hair, even if her features were somewhat more delicate. Alexandra and Helena were two daughters of Dionysus, and I chose them mostly because I had come to appreciate how temporary madness could give you an edge to survive a sticky situation. And given the male/female ratio, I frankly hoped in a big ass orgy at some point during the mission, after all, I was the youngest among them.

"Charles, called Chars unless you want him to punt you into the ground, will be our resident satyr, you never know when an experienced child of the Wild can be life-saving." With our last addiction, I finished the crew call, and we unfurled our black sails trimmed with yellow bands, while six people on each side of the ship started rowing.

As soon as we were at safe distance from the beach, I talked again: "Each of us is a powerful demigod in his own right, more than that, each one of us is a demigod tired of playing around at the Camp without any purpose beyond the one of delighting the gods with our deaths. Power without direction is inert, and living as your common mortal isn't something that appeals any of us."

To the general consent, I spoke on: "So I could tell you the list of several possible objectives that I have set for us. But we all know that you are here to *exercise* that power. So you don't really care what we'll be aiming for as much as actually doing the deed." I knew each one of them, some didn't volunteer, and I had to talk with them to make them recognize their own wishes, but it had been a hassle worthy of my effort.

We reached the end of the bay and steered us south, catching a constant wind on our backs and ordering the crew to retire the oars: "So relax while you can, because you'll need every scrap of power you can muster!"

We were running south, to the Bermuda Triangle: to us, it was the Sea of Monsters, and it was going to be fun.

21 October 2000

While the weather was impossibly warm and sloth-inducing, the sea was uncharacteristically calm, the waves barely perceptible, the wind had died down since the previous night, and, given our position in perspective with the stars, the sea itself seemed to have no currents whatsoever. So, after a day that we spent looking at each other in the eyes without doing a thing, I had quite enough. Stealing one last glance at the two girls sunbathing naked at the end of the deck and considering the setting sun and the already visible stars, I sighed and forced myself to do what was necessary.

"OKAY MAGGOTS! AT THE OARS, I'VE BEEN FRIENDLY MORE THAN ENOUGH, MOVE YOUR SORRY ASSES MOTHERFUCKERS, AND IF YOUR PARENTS EVER LOVED YOU, THERE BETTER BE SOME MYSTICAL MUMBO JUMBO GOING AROUND, BECAUSE OTHERWISE I'LL SACRIFICE THE SLOWER OF YOU TO POSEIDON! MARK MY WORDS! AND IF YOU THINK OR HOPE THAT BEING SHAGGED BY ME GRANTS YOU A PASS, WELL, THINK AGAIN! I DO NOT DISCRIMINATE! ON THIS SHIP YOU ARE ALL EQUALS, AND THAT MEANS THAT YOU ARE ALL WORTHLESS! PUT YOUR BACKS IN IT NUMBSKULLS! SATYR! CLEAN YOUR NOSE WITH COCAINE AND AMBROSIA IF YOU NEED, BUT GIVE ME A DIRECTION! MOVE MOVE MOVE!" Having said my piece and having called the demigods back to order, I turned the helm, pointing us west.

"Why are we going west?" Jillian stopped beside me, a binocular pointing towards the horizon.

"Because magic feels denser in that direction, it's almost like seeing a conglomeration of Mist. Then, as a veteran of a quest that involved Ladon, I can testify that 'When in doubt, look for trouble' is a viable

strategy. And it is a good direction as any." I answered with a sly smile.

"So we're hoping to be lucky." she summed up, causing my grin to widen.

"Icarus, why we never use the engines?" a male voice asked, approaching from behind me.

"First: because they are for when we need to hightail the fuck out of Scilla and Cariddi." I answered honestly.

"What?" David deadpanned.

"Reason two, the crew needs to listen to the captain, so that when we cross the sirens they'll do as I say and not mutiny." I answered to my First Mate and Chief Engineer.

At his widened eyes, I went on: "Second: because having sex with me isn't a ticket to a paid vacation, Helena and Alexandra need to learn that."

At that, he visibly contained a snort, before nodding thoughtfully.

"Third: Training." I looked ahead, taking notice of our position. I knew, intellectually, that the Pleyads were hot blue and luminous stars that had formed within the last 100 million years, but since my escapade in the garden of the Hesperids, which was also the starting point of the whole 'find the golden fleece' problem, I felt like I could understand and feel more. And since then, the sky had felt more alive and aware, if it was because I had held it or because I spent time getting attuned to (read: shagging) the nymphs of the sunset, I didn't know. Maybe it was a mixture of the two. Why would the sunset be relevant? Because it was the celestial event that came before the night. And Nyx, in the Greek mythology, was not only the 'Night' but the unfathomable, the mysteries which were beyond human understanding, the heritage of a time where the night was dark and full of terrors, of a time when humans had barely tamed

fire, and used it to keep themselves safe from both a harsh environment and feral beasts.

"Are you sure you didn't simply want to give your twist to Hartman?" David interrupted my musings.

"That was the fourth reason." I deadpanned, earning myself a laugh.

KRABOOM The thunder rattled my bones.

I took out a little telescope and I berated myself for getting distracted from the sunbathing girls, but hey, apparently they had 'forgotten' their swimsuits. Maybe the wild sex without strings attached had been a theme for the choice of the two Dionysus's daughters, but no more than the eye-candy component had been for the female part of the crew, sure, it had been a secondary trait I had looked for, but an important one nonetheless. *What is the point of organizing your own expedition if you can't have fun while on it?* I shook my head, freeing myself from the distracting images: a fucking storm was in full swing ahead: "Storm incoming on our route! Brace yourselves!" I ordered from my position. And in less than fifteen minutes, we were in full swing of the worst storm the seas had ever seen.

Argo II climbed out of a crashing wave, and in the almost absolute darkness caused by the thick clouds, I saw the waves too close, too tall, too angry. I howled in laughter, almost maniacally, unzipping my raincoat and letting it flap wildly behind me: if the storm wasn't natural, it was the creation of some god. Likely the one who held the title of Stormbringer. So I reached out, feeling my hands on the helm and my feet in my flooded boots. I felt the wind hammering on my face and the rain pelting both me and the ship. And when the next gale came, accompanied by the most titanic wave I had yet seen, I *pushed back*. I didn't quite tame the storm, not even remotely, but the ship slightly shifted his position, the head pointing straight at the incoming wall of water. We climbed.

We were slower that I would have liked, and once more I despised the name given to the ship, inappropriately as it was at the time.

Never before had I wished so much for the land, to feel the sweet brown soils under my feet. Sand, even rocks. For the first time, I felt the rage within the sea, as if not only the ocean, but the sky too suddenly had chosen to pound the puny humans who dared defy it into nothingness. Not to teach us a lesson, oh no, whatever we could learn from the demonstration of rage the world was providing us with would be on our shoulders. The sky had turned pitch black, swallowed by the endless clouds, a constant gale howling under dark and serious clouds. Yet, the ship had kept going over the watery fists, that perhaps were willed into existence with the intention of causing enough bruising for the sailors to remember the sea's anger, enough for them to start a sweet serenade of sorrow. *I suspected that Poseidon would be opposed to us saving Thalia, after all, Zeus had no problems with throwing bolts at Percy's car when he was running back to camp, and Hades was always ready to unleash hell upon the children of his two brothers. The horde that forced me to leave my first home is proof enough.* I thought sardonically while I held on the helm for dear life. I spat a mouthful of saltwater: "This is getting ridiculous."

But the sea didn't care about casualties, didn't care about who held which title among men. Demigod, sailor, captain, bodyguard, and slave: it didn't matter. All would be swallowed by the waves. We were mentally ready for sudden, violent storms that targeted our ship specifically, even if we knew it would not be natural, it was the nature of the half-metaphysical bullshit we were sailing through. With no warning, total darkness had prevailed as clouds thickened and the sky was stricken, blotting out the moonlight and stars. The wind had arisen to push the once still waters to choppy, which morphed into mountains of angry waves. The demigods had struggled to get the sails down and to tie them in place. They slipped on the rain-soaked deck. Godly blood or not, people were starting to panic. Not I, oh no, I was using my limited influence over the sea to keep us going, and a twist on the Mist to try and soothe the fear of my crew. The wind slammed the rain into our faces like tiny stones and pushed our raincoats' hoods back. The ship ran, first up waves at forty-five degrees, and then crashed down jarring our bones. At one point the

waves spun the vessel sideways. We held tightly onto the mast, onto ropes, onto each other, onto anything.

Eric, son of Ares, was an athletic and determined eighteen years old demigod, instead of the bulky build of many of his brothers and sisters, he was short and lean, surprisingly agile, and had a brain between his ears. When the time came to hold down a secondary sail, he flung himself down, wrestling it to the deck, where others managed to tie it. He had barely the time for a shout of defiance to the world, when a wave climbed on the deck and swiped him away, like it was a simple parlor trick. So he fell, to hubris, to a moment of carelessness and to the world's worst storm that I had ever seen.

The waves had grown so large that the vessel was dwarfed, riding up and down the mighty swelling sea like a child's toy. There was no mercy in the wind, no grace in the waves, only wrath, and tempest. The air was thick with a briny mist, the deck awash with salty waves. As the waves rocked the ship almost to a tipping point, everything I was, have been, or ever will be, was concentrated into that tiny string of moments, as if that was the moment in which I was truly born. The wind was strong enough to pick up a man and fling him to the hungry waves, we were forced to take turns on the deck, tying us to the mast with ropes long enough to allow us to move around. Every sense was maxed out, every muscle already working beyond normal capacity and still, there was no end in sight.

There wasn't any more desolate feeling than the mighty swelling of the ocean beneath one's feet and nothing on the horizon but more of the same. In every direction, there was only grey blue black tempest, laced with white, blends into a horizon of the same hue. There is no rescue from land, sea, or air and all anyone could do was give until they are spent.

I narrowed my eyes against the harsh gales: the second mast must have broken during one of the most recent waves and almost fell on someone. *Thank you for the battle-ready reflexes.* Soon another wave climbed its way on the deck and cleaned it. On a few occasions, I had hoped that my life was nothing more than a dream

turned nightmare, and more than ever I would give anything to wake up, for the storm to be just a recreation of my synapses, another lesson from my subconscious. But there was no waking up from the nightmare. I could taste the salty air, sharp on my skin, feel the harsh and cold bite of the wind, my heart pumping so furiously that I felt it in my throat. *Should I see tomorrow, it will be with a new nightmare...* I realized, along with the fact that while I had been able to breathe underwater and control the currents into the bay near the Camp, falling out of the ship would mean drowning even for me. It was in the heaviness of the water, in the dampness that I felt on my skin, in the opposition my will was facing while steering the ship.

But there was nothing of Greek Myths and Magic around us, none of the shining examples of heroism that could carry the world through the apocalypse. Only gray and cold. *We are too slow...*

I hurled back my raincoat's hood with a pensive expression and eyed the ax embedded into the deck, it was still where John had tossed it to cut the sails free in order to avoid the wind dragging the ship for another tango. I watched again the fewer and fewer people on the ship, the hungry sea was enjoying its banquet, slowly eating its way through the crew. It was like it didn't want to immediately sink the ship, preferring to enjoy its meal. *Maybe they are only exhausted in the galley, getting a pick up with ambrosia and nectar.* I calmed myself.

Another thunder rattled my bones, shaking me from my reverie. "What the fuck is up with this storm? It looks alive..."

Then I stopped myself. It could very well be... that the sea, or better, that storm, was alive, hungry and sadistic. It would explain why the waves simply hadn't swallowed us. The promise I had made myself resounded into my mind. **I am free.** And like the thunder around the ship managed to rattle our bones and shake our resolve, the deceptively simple three words gave me strength, resonating too true to be ignored. *I won't bow to this storm.*

And suddenly the choice was very simple. When my tired eyes recognized a yellow raincoat moving around me, I spoke, my words thundering loud enough to be heard: "Hold the helm!" and I dropped off my position, running on the soaked deck until I grabbed the handle of the simple bearded-ax, unhinging it from the wood. Then I ran, cutting with decisive swings the ropes holding captive the sails, which unfurled faster than my eyes could follow them through the rain, the wind almost lifting the ship from the waters. A hand clamped on my shoulder once I made my way towards the helm: "What have you done! The ship will be torn apart, we need to cut away the sails!"

"If we don't ride this storm out, the sea is going to swallow us one after another!" my reply was swift and uncaring, I was the fucking captain, the ship and the crew would heel to my will. And I was unbowed: "Trust in the keel!" I shouted, a manic laugh slipping once more through my lips.

And ride the storm we did. I howled, challenging the waters, the sky, the lightning, the wood of the helm bit deep into my hands, trying to escape control. I wouldn't let it.

I was leading us on the edge of a razor. One misstep was all that was needed for everyone to die.

I was terrified and exalted.

There was no help, no safety net. The option of dropping everything and catching a cab to return to the Camp wasn't there, the small escape rope I had during the quest in Hera's garden was absent, and I felt much more alive because of it.

I was alone, keeping everyone focused on their task while holding onto the helm for dear life.

The lights we set up barely managed to shine through the downpour, seeing the incoming waves was out of the picture, but at least there was a faint white line that followed the bulwark avoided people unknowingly walking in the hungry waves. I pushed and pulled,

steering the boat along the raging waters and sneaking out of the avalanches of sea foam that threatened to swallow us whole. Time lost any meaning, as well as direction, there was only the need of riding the waves.

I grabbed the helm, and pulled, carefully balancing between where I wanted to go and where the sea was bringing me, rocketing down the side of the veritable mountain of water that had just tried to crush us. I led us to ride the winds, the keel cutting the water almost without offering resistance.

I ignored hunger when it came.

I endured the strain of the muscles.

I refused to give in to the killing headache that hammered me every time I closed my eyes.

I was too out of breath to howl my challenging laughter, but I kept grinning like a loon. I drank rain and seawater, washing it down with the nectar I had in my canteen. Finally, like leaving an obscure cave, the ship left the roof made of black clouds, my ears still ringing from the incessant hammering of the thunders. With a start, I recognized that a part of the ringing in my ears was instead a belly laugh, and only after all the others left the galley and looked at me like I was gone off the deep end I realized that I was the one laughing my challenge to sea and sky alike. **I am free.**

And with that realization, I noticed that the sun was climbing up from the East: we drifted on the high of having survived the equivalent of a hurricane in the open sea for several hours before I spotted a single bird descending from the sky. Nobody really noticed, busy as everyone was with either repairs or rest, but I steered us in that direction. Maybe half an hour later, I recognized a spot on the horizon, and led us there unerringly, Ignoring the calls for 'Land-ho!' when they came.

The island was relatively small, just a small amass of woods that signaled the existence of a source of water, but what grabbed my attention was the wailing. It was a desperate sound, the cry of the hopeless, in a rhythm that suggested an almost intermittent pain. We still needed rest, so the ship climbed its way up the sandy beach, and everyone settled down to rest on my orders: "Let's set up a camp and a perimeter, then we can rest. When we gain back some of our strength we'll think about what we can salvage from the island to boosts our reserves, repair the ship, and whatnot."

I landed on the sand with a soft thump accompanied that several other people and walked around the head of the ship, where the violent storm had managed to scratch away the name Argo II. "You are no Argo," I said, remembering the moments during the storm when I wished the ship to sail faster than it did, but in my mind flashed the monumental stress it endured, the blows it survived, the will it defeated: "I dub thee Adámas, unconquerable, invincible. And may you lend your name to the members of the crew."

In the general mutterings of approval, everyone got to work, setting up the tents.

"Chars," I said quietly, causing the satyr to come over to me: "Feel anything?"

I shrugged, looking around and scratching lightly at his still damp beard: "Whatever this wailing is coming from, it has nothing to do with Pan."

"Dead count?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Eric, son of Ares, and Julia, daughter of Athena." he reported with a frown.

"I saw Eric being swept off the deck." I grimaced: "Julia?"

The satyr looked like he was around forty years old, the prominent belly didn't manage to make you ignore the rippling muscles of his

arms or his pecs, while the wide shoulders looked like they could hold back the tide. Even so, when I asked, he visibly sagged, shaking his head. I gritted my teeth: "Organize what rites you can, but without bodies... we'll wait on the island for a couple of days, maybe they will end up on the shore."

Once I said my piece, I left, the annoying guilt that tried to climb on me when Thalia became a tree tried again to ensnare me. I picked up a spear from the hull and went into the woods, killing my lunch could help me with deal with my simmering rage.

I crept through the undergrowth, getting closer to the origin of the wailing: a wounded animal could mean a predator was around, so in the best situation, I would find an animal ready to be killed, in the worse case, I could burn through some of my anger at having lost two people already. Soon enough, I found myself going uphill, the terrain becoming rocky and lifeless, the trees disappearing one after another. I walked around what was an actual promontory and climbed a relatively low cliff. Once I reached the top, I found a small plateau that surrounded a jagged rock as big as my hut back at the Camp. What was more interesting however, was the man chained to it, and the eagle intent in ripping out his liver.

"I thought you had been freed by Heracles." I blurted out without thinking.

Prometheus gritted his teeth to ignore the pain before grimacing in my direction: "No longer, as you can see."

Father of Mankind

Once I reached the top, I found a small plateau that surrounded a jagged rock as big as my hut back at the Camp. What was more interesting however, was the man chained to it, and the eagle intent in ripping out his liver. "I thought you had been freed by Heracles." I blurted out without thinking. Prometheus gritted his teeth to ignore the pain before grimacing: "No longer, as you can see."

Very much like his brother, the Titan cut an impressive figure, even if in a different way. Seven feet tall, black hair buried under grime and blood, skin completely littered with scars. Even forced to stand against the uncomfortable rock, likely shaped to cut into his back, hurting him almost as much as the eagle that was feasting on his liver, his presence was noticeable. Not imposing like Atlas was, but I felt like I already entered a game I didn't know the rules of. While his brother had at least a loincloth covering him, Prometheus had been stripped bare, his only garments were the thick bands of black metal that held him in place.

Still, while I looked with sick fascination at the eagle busy getting its pound of flesh from the Titan, I noticed there was something wrong: he had stopped his wailing. Without really thinking about it, and with the familiarity born from years of practice, I recognized the not-real and not-actually-there dust particles suspended in a ray of sunshine, changing my focus on them, I recognized them as strands of Mist, and wrapped myself in them, masking my presence.

Under the mass of hair that hid his face, the Titan opened a single eye, and even from where I was, I could see its grey color, and shapes... stones being used to sharpen wood, water directed to keep clay malleable, sparks of warmth, inspiration, planning, light in the dark... "You think I can't recognize what I helped create? No power under the sky can hide a mortal from me, not this close, and not in the middle of my punishment." the words ripped me from the images

of... progress and technology that I was seeing, rooting me once more on the promontory where the Titan was being punished.

"It's been a long time since a demigod stumbled upon me, tell me, what do you seek? Perhaps we can help each other." Prometheus suggested as if he was sitting in a comfy chair in a study, evaluating this or that trade, no trace of pain could be heard in his voice, only a honest wish to help and be helped in return. Tilting my head and dropping the Mist, I saw that his expression matched his words, at least from what I could observe, the flapping wings of the eagle made difficult taking in his features.

I knew of Prometheus, but I had the feeling that flaunting my knowledge wouldn't unbalance him as much as it did Atlas, they had two vastly different personalities. He wanted to be freed, like his brother did, however in this case I wasn't at risk of taking his place, from whatever bargain we struck that included his freedom, I could only gain something. *Then why do I feel like I am already being played?* I frowned.

"You know what, I'll be back tomorrow, I'm too spent to deal with a Titan right now." I recognized that after the storm I wasn't at 100%, Prometheus took his punishment like a champ since whenever he had been returned to his rock after Heracles freed him the first time. He could wait a couple of days.

While walking back to the camp, I considered the headache that Prometheus would be. Atlas had been relatively easy to push into helping me, but I had a simple request and a deceptively simple solution. From the stories, I knew that my last mythological problem was in the information business, after all he had instructed Heracles in how to pluck the golden apples in exchange for his freedom. So, our confrontation would turn out to be a trade of sorts, his freedom for what I wished to know, repeating Heracles steps. It had served me well with Atlas.

While I was walking, a sudden shudder among the undergrowth grabbed my attention. From a bush, an animal came forward, eyeing me warily: it was a bulky, massively built suid with short and relatively thin legs. A short and robust trunk, with hindquarters comparatively underdeveloped. The region behind the shoulder blades rose into a hump, while the short neck held up the very large head, which took up one-third of the body's entire length.

The wild beast measured at least a meter in shoulder height and at least two meters and something in length. It was significantly larger than the average boar, and his tusks gleamed sharply in the sunlight that managed to break through the blotched canopy of leaves.

Really, a boar? The 'woods' I was walking in were so more by name than by any merit. But whatever my considerations regarding the situation were, they took the backseat in my mind once the beast charged. I waited until he was less than a meter from me before sidestepping, the natural reflexes of a demigod, furtherly honed by training, more than enough to deal with a boar. Said animal was capable of reaching 40 km/h, and his neck easily upturned weights of 50 kg, but after Ladon, I wasn't overly concerned. So I dodged and took a more adequate stance, following the boar as he finished his charge.

As soon as he turned to have another go at me, the spear I had picked up embedded itself into his flank, biting deep.

Half an hour later, I had managed to drag the boar back to the camp, where I was hailed as Prodigious Captain Hunter, and soon enough, all the demigods were huddled in groups of two or three around several small campfires, eating quietly while each one worked through the death of two of our crewmates. I sat with Charles, Jillian, David and Hailey, slowly thinking about my meeting.

"Strange place to find a boar." Chars frowned: "It's not its standard environment."

Jillian snorted: "There is also the fact that we are on an island in the Sea of Monsters, and that we have met 0 monsters so far."

"At least Hannah will drop off your back about the 'disappearing' food." Hailey joked.

I rolled my eyes: "As I've already told her, I don't eat what she doesn't cook. And besides, I'm lucky when it comes to fishing, we didn't risk our reserves, even if someone among us served itself to an extra meal now and then."

David frowned lightly, his form hunching forward: "Returning to... more relevant matters, what did you find? You are not reacting as the boar was the strangest thing happened since we touched land."

Chars nodded, accepting the reasoning of the demigod: "And coincidentally, the wailing stopped. What agonizing beast did you end the life of?"

"Not a beast." I shook my head, looking deeply into the flames, "A Titan, and I didn't kill him."

Jillian cursed under her breath: "It's Prometheus isn't it?"

"Who is that guy?" David frowned, his historical knowledge was a bit lacking, but it was okay, his duties revolved around machines and keeping the demigods on my ship running.

I sighed, pinching my nose. *Story time.*

"After the gods had molded men and other living creatures with a mixture of clay and fire, the two brothers Epimetheus and Prometheus were called to complete the task and distribute among the newly born creatures all sorts of natural qualities." I started to explain: "Epimetheus set to work but, being dimwitted, distributed all the gifts of nature among the animals, leaving men naked and unprotected, unable to defend themselves, and to survive in a hostile world. To counter his brother's stupidity, Prometheus took the fire of

creative power from the workshop of Athena and Haephestus and gave it to mankind."

"So... a good guy?" David rose an eyebrow.

I snorted: "That is only a version of it, another places Prometheus as the creator of mankind. Honestly, take whatever you know about him with a pinch of salt. We inherited scheming from him after all."

"Prometheus is also said to have helped in the birth of the my mother, by keeping open the head of Zeus as a fully-formed Athena issued out of the gaping hole in the King's head. The relations went well between Zeus and Prometheus in the beginning. However, as men on the Earth multiplied and prospered, aided by Prometheus who had given them fire and many beneficial arts, Zeus became concerned about their growing power." Jillian continued the story, looking around skittishly, like she was about to be struck by lightning.

I nodded, surprised by her knowledge: "The anger of Zeus against mankind, and their helper Prometheus, was first aroused when the latter duped the King of the gods into choosing the worst part of a sacrificial bull. Prometheus wrapped the bones of the slain bull in fat while he covered the best part, the flesh, with the intestines. Zeus unknowingly chose the fat-covered heap of bones, while the flesh wrapped in the intestines was given to hungry men. That is why mankind used to sacrifice the bones to the gods."

I rolled my shoulders, thinking again at the image of the Titan chained to the rock: "Zeus, in revenge, withheld fire, the most necessary element of civilization, from humankind, putting them to untold miseries. However, Prometheus soon came to our help. He stole fire from the workshop of Hephaestus, the god of fire and patron of artisans and craftsmen, and passed it, hidden in a stalk of fennel, on to humankind."

"So he is good. Right?" David was reasonably confused.

"He is self-serving. He was the one to tell Hercules how to trick Atlas in order to obtain the golden apples of immortality, in exchange of being freed." I shook my head.

"So..." Jillian frowned: "Why is he still chained if he has been freed before?"

"Chiron died a long time ago, in fact, he is a constellation." I rolled my eyes: "Some shit does not make sense, I'm guessing that Olympus can pull some strange shit sometimes. In any case, I'll go and see if he knows something interesting, keep this for yourselves, nobody is to leave the camp, and everyone is to stay away from the promontory."

Hailey rose an eyebrow while turning towards me: "No offense, captain, but I'm pretty curious to see a Titan in a safe environment."

I leveled her a cold stare: "I met **Atlas**. I chatted with him, back during the last mission." I rolled my shoulders, trying to untie them from the stiffness that overcame them at the memory of holding the sky: "There is no such a thing as a 'safe Titan'."

"Now you *have* to tell us that story!" Jillian ordered, but she had a playful smile on her face, so I didn't feel guilty when I shook my head and returned to my meal.

After the late lunch, I dropped down in the shade cast by the ship, the cool water of the sea submerging me up to my knees with each wave, and fell in a blissful sleep, like most of my crew.

When I assumed was hours later, given the fact that the sun was setting, I awoke to the sound of Hailey calling for me. I left my relaxing spot, ignoring the wet sand clinging to me and the sun's rays that still felt like they belonged to a much more tropical weather: "What's up?" I asked once I climbed back on the deck.

And I knew the answer before Hailey could manage to explain it. With a defiant expression, a ten years old Annabeth was glaring at

me. And my headache became much worse.

I can't deal with her and Prometheus both. I sighed: "Jillian!"

When the demigoddess left the hull and her eyes found her sister, her expression soured, her eyes gaining a steely glint. "Take care of your sister, will you? I'm sure you can keep her busy enough that she can't figure out a way to kill herself because of the stupidity born from believing herself too smart for her own good."

Once the sun went down, I saw the eagle rise towards the heavens, its task for the day completed, I left the camp and made my way towards the chained Titan.

Under the moonlight, the small plateau and its prisoner looked extremely different from the image of controlled pain I had observed during the day. Prometheus, bound as he was to his rock, with the pale light casting misty shadows from his brow which looked almost like a crown, his half lidded eyes giving off a faint glow: he looked like a king holding court.

"Walk forward, mortal, I hope that now you are strong enough to talk with me, even if I fear that I can't properly greet you." He chuckled quietly.

"Hercules freed you. Every story matches it." I wondered out loud.

Prometheus sighed dejectedly, completely changing his tune: "In the same way your Chiron is a constellation, perhaps? I only know that there is no easy escape from the judgment of the King of Olympus."

"And you stopped your wailing as soon as I entered your... cell?" I kept walking forward, before sitting on the ground less than three meters from the Titan.

"How much weight can you put on someone's shoulders before its growth becomes irrelevant? How long can pain overcome one's mind

before it becomes irrelevant?" he tilted his head: "Adapting is the heart of progress, I am more than simply acquainted with both."

I sighed, eyeing with mistrust the figure crowned with shade cast by the moonlight: "You'll want to be free, no doubt."

The grim smile I received in return was the only answer I needed: "But what you'll do with your freedom concerns me. Nobody really likes the King of the Gods, but whatever revenge you wish to enforce would surely bring with it calamity and open war, of which I need neither."

"Why are you here then?" his voice wasn't as deep and commanding as Atlas' one had been, it had a... liquid quality to it, almost like warm honey.

Because I'm curious. I suppressed that thought. *Becuse I imagine that chains capable of holding a Titan can be recycled for anooying gods...* I pushed that to the back of my mind, choosing instead to redirect the conversation: "Do you know where Pandora's box is? I'm looking for Elpis."

"I could find it." the Titan nodded: "If you were actually looking for it, that is. Why don't you tell me what you're actually looking for?"

I was annoyed by his finding out that I lied in half a second, but transaction worked in two ways... what could I ask for? A way to navigate the Labirynt? A map towards the Golden Fleece? Kidnapping a clear sighted mortal didn't sound so difficult, and if Polyphemus abitually ate satyrs, Chars would lead us there ecentually. I wasn't looking for anything the Titan could offer me. I chose a shot in the dark: "What do you know of other pantheons?"

I had the feeling it was a topic that the ruling class of gods would have disliked (for fear of the competition), and going on my own looking for other cultures' deites sounded a one way tivket towsrds an horrible death.

The Titan recoiled in distaste: "You ask for something not meant to be known, either by God, Titan, Giant or Mortal." I shrugged, not feeling exactly apologetic.

"I can offer my help in your quest, demigod." Prometheus said trying to make it sound like it was some kind of big deal. "As a rule, I don't strike pacts with people trickier than me." I snorted, I was just as surprised as he was, that a demigod had nothing to ask to an immortal... it didn't happen often. Besides, I had a general idea about how to recover the Golden Fleece and how to find the 'last message' of Pan, I didn't want any more help on that front. I wanted Thalia healed, sure, but neither of the purposes of my trip were going anywhere.

"Simple gifts for simple minds." the Titan grumbled, his tone souring a bit: "You are far from being simple." he tilted his head, studying my wary form. "You met my kin before." he stated, and in his words there was no doubt or uncertainty, my lack of reaction apparently egging him on: "And considered the lack of Tartarus' shade over your eyes, the list narrows considerably."

A loopsided grin found its way on my face: "**Atlas** is well, if that is your roundabout way to ask after family."

The eyes of the Titan widened, a smile that had no business being so carefree answering my words: "Skyholder." he accused me, causing me to bow my head mockingly.

"Yet, you've still nothing to offer." I laid back on the plateau, my weight resting on my elbows, so that my eyes could go from the chained immortal to the cloudless sky: "I won't deny that freeing you interests me, I'd like to see what events would follow, but for now, the King's benevolence is one of the few things that stills the hand of the Council."

Perceiving Prometheus' curiosity more than actually seeing it on his face, I elaborated: "I kicked Delphi's Oracle, and I've been less than... respectful, with the Queen."

The laugh of the Titan was heart-warming: "We are more alike than I suspected then."

"If what you say is true, then why did you go against his will and gave fire to mankind?" I was actually interested, I sure as hell wasn't the generous, filantropic sort.

The answer came with a decisiveness and certainty that I didn't expect: "Because I could. Because the current King is an upstart who forgot his place a long time ago. And because without many looking the other way, he would have been found while hiding with his goat Amalthea..." he shook his head: "Because for all the immortals' boasting, I could tell the magnitude of what men could build, could understand, could dream. When Coeus confirmed my intuition... I couldn't just let it be."

Because I could. I repeated to myself, finding that the words actually made sense. I stole from mortals for the same reason, for the same reason I hit the Oracle, and I refused to sacrifice shit to Poseidon before our travel because I could survive it, and my crew could either adapt or die.

"Just because you can do a thing, does not always mean you should. Do you have no better reason for acting than follow your impulses?" I snorted: "Coeus represented rational intelligence, he hardly qualifies as someone who knows Fate, betting on his words..."

The Titan laughed: "I am *pro*-before and *methos*-learning! Forethought is right up my alley, but you're right, foresight it's not." He glanced at the sky, taking in the countless stars: "I cannot say, I can only imagine consequences of what I see, very much like you do, we both know that the vaster an event see, the clearer the trame of the world becomes, I knew when my brother failed to gift appropriate traits to mankind that I had to do his part, and that it would be too much."

He shook his arms, the chains rattling against the rock with a dull clang: "Even those who ride the currents of Time cannot see past Time's end... The King's father has always been dangerous, and it's by his design that even those who try to hasten the end, may delay it, while those who work to delay the end, may bring it closer, as *he* did when he devoured his sons."

Neither of us spoke the name Kronos out loud, but we both knew who we were referring to: "You may have an inkling as why I don't want you gallivanting around, picking up the pieces."

Prometheus was more amused than enraged by seeing his chance at freedom turn into smoke with my words: "So you *do* have a way to see what is yet to happen. But who guides your knowledge? Surely not the Sun's god, I saw how his rays despised you when you came during the day..."

I blinked, realizing that I had left many secrets out for him to pick up. *That's it.* While it was undoubtedly interesting chatting with a Titan, I was in no position to help him, nor I was gaining anything from our midnight chat. There was no objective, nothing to gain, no reason to act, or to try and outwit him.

"*He* took domination as his birthright, after he fell Uranous... his sickle was dangerous for every being, and many feared to fall when time for the harvest came..." Prometheus shook his head: "He was the first cause of his own undoing, be careful, mortal that you not do the same."

With those ominous words, I chose to leave the Titan to his prison and walked back to the camp. *Well, it has been underwhelming.*

"It would be almost effortless for you to free me. These chains are just strong enough that I can't overcome them alone, you could grant me my freedom with a simple tug, surely it's not too much to ask?" He tried to rekindle my interest, but I kept walking.

"I have much to offer for very little in exchange, if it's not an artifact that you seek, perhaps a gift would interest you more?" His words reminded me that he had an important role in the birth of Pandora, the first mortal woman, *Pan-all Dōron*-gift, it was... an opportunity? Maybe, but I had the feel that asking for something out of greed would only bite me in the ass further down the line.

23 October 2000

During the past days, David organized the demigods, cutting down trees, drying the wood with an improvised press, shaping new planks to substitute the broken ones, while Hannah, Demeter's daughter, found herself busy carving vines and leaves out of our new mast. If art was her way to face the almost panic that keeping travelling the Sea of Monsters entailed, nobody pointed it out.

I was trying to not take Annabeth in my own hands, I couldn't be bothered and I was busy figuring out the whys and hows of our situation. Still, I saw her skittering around after Jillian, who was keeping to her task with a zeal I didn't suspect she had in her.

With a sigh, I went back to my thoughts: the rest of the woods was suspiciously devoid of animals. No foxes, wolves, boars, squirrels. Now the real question was: how did the first boar managed to land on the island just in time for me to kill it? The obvious answer was clearly divine intervention, which brought up another query: why would Ares send his sacred animal to be eaten by demigods?

Did he approve our mission? If yes, why? I refused to forget that Ares was the god of War, as such he liked a very specific set of things, none of which I wanted to touch with a ten foot pole.

24 October 2000

The day we were ready to set sail, I was trying to kill my headache with sheer force of will, since once more I had been forced to

postpone our leaving the small island. With the dawn, an eagle had descended from the sky, only to fly away immediately after.

That caused me to run to the promontory, where I looked dejectedly at the black chains still hanging from the rock, taking in the conspicuous absence of their prisoner, and sighed.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what happened, not when Annabeth's smug expression was clearly visible in my mind. *I'm surprised I didn't see this coming.* I reprimanded myself.

Events didn't happen without cause, not while walking between mythology and reality. Every action was part of a bigger flow that ended up being Fate, it was obvious to me that for all my **I am free**, the chains around me were still too strict.

Challenges were not random, the sirens tested Ulysses curiosity, forcing him to make use of his wit to listen to them and ensure his own and his crew's survival. My trying to circumvent Luke's choice for his quest ended up with me finding an important part of myself while holding the sky and ended up with Thalia as a tree. Every element had consequences, and they never ended up not causing something relevant.

After the storm we boarded the first island we met, where I found Prometheus, but I refused any kind of exchange. Not freeing him, not giving him earth shattering revelations nor receiving secrets in return.

I avoided the 'challenge' the 'focal event' of the island, not interacting with the flow of Fate. And Annabeth did it in my stead.

I never really understood the term problem-child until now. I sighed again.

What do I say to Death?

WHAT DO I SAY TO DEATH?

24 October 2000

The weather was strangely quiet, and there weren't visible dangers ready to swallow us, so I was granted a reprieve from having to hold the helm with obsessive caution. *Duty or pleasure?* I asked myself, and after a brief consideration, I chose the first.

I walked back inside the ship and walked into a room we had repurposed for Annabeth's 'punishment'.

I nodded to Emily, the daughter of Ares who was reading a book in a corner of the room: "I'll take this watch." I said while sitting on another chair and looking at the ten years old that hadn't stopped the mechanical movements of her detention. In the roughly square room, besides a couple of chairs and a small table, there were two bathtubs, placed one over the other. The upper one had holes on its bottom, so that when water was poured into it, it trailed down into the bottom tub. Annabeth was busy with a bucket, taking water from the tub at her feet and pouring it in the upper one.

All in all, it was a good exercise for tights, back and arms, and the water sloshed just enough that she had to be careful to not spill it around. At the same time, it was a mindnumbing task of terrifying implications: it was clear that her actions were not helping in any way our mission, that she was wasting her time, and also the time of whatever demigods had to keep watch to ensure she was attending her duties.

"Intelligence is useful, but not when it gives you tunnel vision." I started, noticing that Annabeth started grinding her teeth. I really disliked the idea of playing responsible adult in any kind of situation,

it was a pointless hassle, but the demigoddess was 10 years old, I couldn't honestly expect her to figure out the magnitude of her fuck up on her own.

When she kept attending to her task in stubborn silence, I went on, knowing that in the sheer boredom imposed by her punishment, every one of my words would at least be listened to as a distraction, if nothing else: "Wisdom is the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment."

As she bristled I withheld an exasperated sigh: "You have brains, nobody doubts it, you've been birthed with those. But, and I say it without any ill will, you're 10 years old. As such, whatever choice you make in the real world tends to be a dumb one."

When she whipped her head towards me with an outraged expression, I simply pointed at the tubs, causing her to return to work with a snarl: "Chiron doesn't allow demigods under 12 to undertake quests. You ignored the experience and evaluation of an immortal who has been dealing with demigods going on almost suicide missions since at least 8th century Before Christ, which is the date of the earliest proof of Greek civilization."

I dismissed whatever she was mumbling under her breath and carried on: "Instead of sticking close with your brothers and sisters, with your friends, with Luke, you chose to join a group of people you don't know. And you also did it as a clandestine, stealing resources that you can't pay back with any kind of work, thusly damaging the chances of success of the mission."

"I can help! I figured out..." she stopped protesting with a startled jump when my palm slammed flat against the table, cutting her off with a loud bang: "Trust and discipline are of fundamental importance on a ship, especially when we don't know how long we'll be at sea. Since you came on board in secret, and hid yourself for all the duration of the trip, there is no trust."

"So I can't assign you any kind of task, or leave you unsupervised." my voice remained calm and level for the whole exchange, and I saw that the logically structured speech was being followed: "Gallivanting around an island you had no information of and not reporting your finding of a Titan to the crew clearly displayed a lack of whatever respect for hierarchy you should have. And it stated again that you don't trust anyone in this ship."

She flinched minutely at my words, she was smart enough that even at her young age, she could follow my reasoning, even if she still believed she acted in the best interests of everybody: "And to cap it all, during your personal crusade against my evil-ness, you freed Prometheus, and make no mistake: you dragged on us the displeasure of the King of the gods, which is the least important consequence, all for information that I already had."

She dropped her bucket and tried to stare me down: "You don't know! Prometheus told only me and..."

"And the satyr will sooner or later smell the distinctive magic of the Golden Fleece, leading us to Polyphemus' cave, where he will ambush us." I completed for her, causing her jaw to drop slightly and her voice to abandon her.

I rose from my seated position and walked toward the ten years old girl, who looked... lost, for lack of a better expression: "If you unwillingly stomp a venomous snake you get bitten, intentions are relevant, but they rarely affect the consequences of your actions."

I squeezed her shoulder and left the room after having watched carefully her shifting expression. I wasn't going to drop on her the resurrection of Kronos, that had likely been anticipated because of her stunt, she was a ten years old girl with a superiority complex, her punishment would highlight her uselessness on the trip while our chat would drive home the point that she wasn't all-knowing. Telling a ten years old girl that he's useless isn't really conducive to any form of improvement, but showing a ten years old demigoddess capable of sneaking on my ship that she had to rely on others looked

like a better alternative. It wasn't like I could execute or beat a child for wanting to help her friend-turned-tree, and I couldn't just drop her off or bring her back to camp.

A few minutes later, I joined David in the workshop where he could build the machines necessary to the ship on the fly, and reached his body, slumped on a chair in front of a desk where thick, black chains were resting.

"What do you make of them?" I asked, eyeing them warily.

The son of Hephaestus turned to look at me, revealing deep bags under his eyes and a tired expression: "I'd need a proper forge to find their melting point, I couldn't cut away a single shard to figure out the material under a microscope, I don't..." He stopped, taking a deep breath and centering himself, before poking with a screwdriver at the pieces of dark stone we had to break off from the giant boulder where Prometheus was bound: "Can we use it as it is? Yes. Do I know what this shit is? No."

I nodded, thinking about how we could use chains just strong enough to bind the last Titan I met: "Go to sleep, you'll need it."

31 November 2000

The reckon team was composed of four members, optimizing the strength of numbers with the speed that a small group could use to cross a wide area. Accompanying me there was Charles, our resident satyr, Hailey, daughter of Hermes and our best sneak, and finally Sofia, who acted as our ranged fighter and healer both. The island was... strange, there was no other way to describe it. We all knew that in the Sea of Monsters matters like common sense and logic didn't work properly, not when facing the unnaturalness of mythology. While the island where we had found Prometheus had a temperate climate, we were now finding our way through some kind of marsh-swamp hybrid.

We had reached the island with the dawn, crossing a heavy fog that had clung to us like some creepy type of spiderweb, I wouldn't have wished to make land, but an occasion to replenish our reserves on 'dry' land couldn't be ignored, while Charles had felt '*something*' in the inland. I couldn't exactly refuse him, besides, while finding the Golden Fleece had been my excuse for the expedition, another was that I could ill-tolerate the atmosphere at the Camp, and adventure called for everyone, not only myself.

The wetland was an area of land where water covered the ground for long periods of time. Unlike the swamps sections of the island, which were dominated by trees, the marsh was dominated by grasses and other herbaceous plants. We were treading through some kind of herbaceous plant that reached up to our chest, and we were flanking the swamp proper. I wasn't an expert on biodiversity, but I would have thought that at least *some* animals should have lived in the area. For the last hour, we had met none: "Chars, are we going into the scary looking swamp?" Sofia asked with a frown. The sun may have been high in the sky, but the damp mist surrounding us hadn't lifted, making her a bit jumpy.

The satyr nodded silently, keeping his eyes peeled onwards until we crossed the first mangrove trees: "Careful now, the snakes may look like roots." he warned us in a bland tone before walking forward. The swamp was dominated by cypress, hardwood, and mangrove trees. The area was neither totally land nor totally water, and forced us to look carefully before each step, and our focus cut into our usually cheerfully chatty demeanor, leaving us in an eerie silence. From time to time we met bare flats of mud and sand that were thinly covered by seawater. My eyes picked up crabs, conchs, and other shellfish, while my ears spotted a fluttering of wings from time to time, signaling that at least some birds had followed their nature, eager to eat easy prey. An occasional gleam underwater dragged my eyes over scales that belonged to either small fishes or snakes. But that caused my hairs to stand up straight on my arms: every animal looked almost... *careful*, almost scared to move clumsily and cause some kind of noise. *Now that I think about it the animals are running*

away from us. "Let's keep it quiet, Charles take point, Sofia, behind me, Hailey, can you move among the branches?" While I whispered my orders I untied the sword from my waist, eyeing approvingly when everybody followed my commands.

We moved cautiously, and soon enough we came into the swamp equivalent of a large clearing, and the mist was only a thin veil over the surface of the water, like some kind of shapeshifting lid pulled over a secret. We spread among the roots and the lower branches of the trees, mindful of our steps. In the silence, Charles' warning came too late: "We're attacked!"

In a flash of gray-green scales and an unholy mix of hissing and growling, a giant snake-like monster was on us, teeth as long as my arm slick of a black like substance, with proportionate heads and slitted eyes of a poisonous yellow: all in all, a promise of a horrible death. I jumped back among the roots just above the water and ran around a tree, spying the beast from the relative safety of behind a trunk.

As soon as I took an actual look to the whole monster trashing in the clearing my blood ran cold: the resemblance to Ladon was there, if only for the multiple heads, even if these had a more serpentine-like shape than the clearly draconic ones of the Warden of the Golden Apple Tree. Where Ladon maws hosted an impressive row of teeth, its heads had square jaws and horns, our current enemy instead sported heads that followed a more triangular shape, and rows of needle-like fangs. *The fucking hydra!* I cursed under my breath, before warning the others: "Deadly venom! Don't let yourself be bitten, and don't cut off the heads, they'll just grow back twice as many!"

I heard the dismayed answers of my team while I called upon the Mist, shrouding myself in it and tossing myself back into the clearing. The Hydra, also called the Lernean Hydra, in Greek legend was the offspring of Typhon and Echidna, a gigantic water-snake-like monster with nine heads. The monster's haunt was the marshes of Lerna, near Árgos, from which he periodically emerged to harry the

people and livestock of Lerna. Anyone who attempted to behead the Hydra found that as soon as one head was cut off, two more heads would emerge from the fresh wound. Heracles defeated it having someone cauterizing the necks after he severed the heads. My mind quickly thought about how to replicate the hero's quest.

Balancing myself on unstable roots wasn't easy, and I was too low on the surface of the water to keep track of my team, even if I could see the effect of their attacks: Chars was likely the one responsible for the ensnaring branches that distracted or tried to stop the monster, while arrows occasionally managed to embed themselves into an eye here and there, Hailey was doing her best to simply avoiding being bit off in half. She was nimble enough for it, even if her knife and sword were less than useful in arming the monster.

In a reckless act that I executed only because my brain was operating too slowly for me to survive following its directions, I jumped, landing on the slightly slimy back of the giant nine-headed beast. As three of the heads turned towards me hissing in outrage at the weight they felt, I stabbed my sword in what I hoped was the spine of the beast, the celestial bronze blade sinking with some resistance through the scales. While one of the three heads reeled back in pain, the other two lunged forward me, fangs snapping at the empty space I left behind after I rolled off its side. Just as my feet landed precariously on the roots over the muddy water, the Hydra's body twitched, bludgeoning me through the clearing and against a tree.

I wheezed, cursing mentally as the air left my lungs. I couldn't stop to evaluate my situation, as the two heads had no problem in following my impromptu flight and were already closing in on me. I finished sliding down on the trunk with my back, and as soon as I had some kind of leverage I tossed myself aside, rolling on the uneven net of knotted roots, likely Charles was doing his best to create some kind of surface for us to stand on, showing that his experience as a Seeker was enough to allow him to keep his head: "Sofia!" I

managed to shout, "Send a warning to the others, then prepare the incendiary arrows!"

Trusting her to recognize my order and pull back from the fight until she was ready to complete it, I let myself fall into the fight once more into myself, picking the options offered by my instinct as an expert guitarist could choose a string over another while improvising. Teachings about sword and shield slowly slid off me, leaving me with only my gut as a guide.

Instead of worsening my performance, I became much ...*more*. Faster, stronger, less predictable. Like when I had fought seriously against Thalia, I went all out after months of carefully managing my strength, my power. I had left behind staff, spear, shield, ax, and sword, everything was just another way to push forward in an unrelenting, battering attack, or retreating with the swiftness of a leaving wave.

Distractedly, I kept a track of my surroundings and of my team, but it was of secondary importance. *It's lucky that I left Adamas while geared up for war.* I admitted to myself. The shaft of my spear had broke as soon as I tried to use it to redirect the impact of one bite, the round shield on my back had managed to lessen some of the impacts I hadn't managed to avoid, but from his lumpy feeling, I could tell that he was hammered in in several places, the sword I had managed to land some actual injuries with hadn't been dulled by the venom, but I couldn't risk getting a single drop of it on my skin: it acted only on organic matter, but I remembered that Hercules had been killed by it, and while I had actually outlasted the fucker in holding up the sky, I *really* didn't want to test myself against the cause of his death.

While all those considerations rolled together in a maelstrom in the back of my head, I somersaulted over the Hydra's sweeping tail and behind one of its heads, like a waver rolling over a rock, and slashed with the sword, having care of keeping the swing going so that the venom wouldn't land on me. The tip of the blade cut about twenty centimeters into the neck of the beast, apparently severing just

enough muscles that the head dipped down, but not enough to trigger the regrowth of another couple of the heads.

"I'm ready Icarus!" Sofia's voice seemed to come from another world as I kept the momentum of my swing in order to slam the flat of the blade against the teeth of another head that was trying to bite me. I jumped back, running down the twitching neck of the almost severed head in a feat of balance that I didn't think myself capable of: "Hailey run towards the ship and tell them we're facing the Hydra, they need to stay out of the fight, only long-range support!" I shouted jumping down one side and landing again on roots that buckled under my weight but didn't snap. I jumped, rolled, and changed my direction no less than 4 times in the following three seconds, gaining some measure of breathing room from the rampaging monster while the eight heads still capable of a complete range of movement hovered confused over the not that couldn't get back up.

"Sofia! When I cut off one head, I want you to immediately rain fire on it, Charles, I need ground as steady as you can make it!" And I launched myself back into the fray, knowing that my movements recalled the sea, the rhythm mimicking the up and down of the waves, alternating times in which I kept attacking to periods during which I stood on the defensive, behaving like waves during the storm that tried to sink the Adamas.

I made sure my shield was secured on my back and covered the otherwise exposed back of my neck, and as I charged, the muddy water answered to my call almost as the currents did back in the Camp's bay. My right hand slid upwards on the broken shaft of the spear I recovered while running, and I threw it like a javelin, hoping that it would land into an eye of the beast. While the improvised weapon flew, brown water exploded like a geyser between me and the Hydra, making it so that it couldn't see me while I manipulated the Mist. As I spun my illusions, the tentative hold I had on the waters of the swamp died, but what I had managed had been enough.

The eight heads still capable of moving lunged forward, two of each targeting a different generic greek soldier I shaped out of thin air. In the moments while my instincts receded I could take a proper look at the beast: of its eight heads, two had arrows' shafts sprouting from both of their eyes, while another two had a single working eye. Even before I had given my orders, Sofia had been far from foolish enough to strike the thick scales of the beast. In the moments I had thusly gained, I fished out a lighter from my pocket and with it, I lit up the venom that coated my sword, grinning when a sickly looking green fire that spat an oily looking dark-green smoke climbed on the blade. *In the stories a simple torch had been used to cauterize the beheading, but how could a torch have the time to act on a beast that has no intention of staying still?* My intuitive jump had been a shot in the dark, but for once I was happy that it had actually worked.

I held my breath as I closed in on one of the heads that still had both of its eyes, and wrapped another layer of Mist around me, making sure to cover smell and sound along with sight. With quick steps as quiet as I could make them, I moved in a pattern that kept me out from the battle going on between the confused heads and my illusions. My target lunged for a fake soldier that fell on its knee when I made it do so, and my sword fell in a lightning fast slash. As the blade cut through the monster, the exposed parts of its insides caught fire like they were running on petrol.

Instead of retreating and planning a new attack, I pushed forward, taking another step and letting my instinct surface: a second sweep took down the closest head, that had lunged with its twin towards its target. As the illusions withered and disappeared, I jumped back, my sword being plunged into the water and putting out the fire so that I could take a deep breath without risking breathing the poisonous fumes.

One head unable to rise, two more are gone. I counted, there were still six to be removed and cauterized, and with that thought in mind, I dug into myself and brought forward that unrelenting fury that only a storm out at sea could properly embody, turning my arms into

whirlpools ready to redirect whatever came into their range, my legs gained the strength of a deep current, and I wielded the strength of the tides.

I moved on the left of the confused monster, closing in to one of the heads that still had both eyes working, twisting my torso as I let the momentum make my left hand slide down the handle of the sword, allowing me that tiny increase in range sufficient to rip through an eye otherwise out of my reach. I slid a shield off my back and held on my left arm and slammed it against another head, and low boom resonated in the swamp as the beast recoiled in rage, and another head slammed against my shield immediately later, causing me to lose my footing as I was once more flung into the muddy waters amongst the mangroves' roots. The water moved following my will, allowing me to move as I couldn't have done otherwise, nimble and quick, I found again my footing as I emerged from beneath the water, like some strange mixture of The Thing and a Moss-covered patch of ground.

Once more I took a deep breath and took a step back from the churning power inside me and looked at the situation with a clear head, once more reaching to the Mist and hiding myself from view as other greek soldiers appeared out of nowhere walking on the waters towards the Hydra, who was eyeing them suspiciously, sniffing the air or tasting it with its tongues looking for me.

Again, I crept forward avoiding the area where the heads were pointlessly trying to eat my illusions, that moved with impossible speed just out of the beast's way. Once more, I attacked when a head lunged: "Now Sofia!" the invisibility over me broke as the intent behind my shout opposed the will to hide intrinsic of the Mist's manipulation. As the arrow landed on the wound and set it on fire, I rammed my bent shield against a blind head, forcing it back and slashed with the sword in my hand as another head decided that I was a priority. I raised the sword over my head and hit with the flat of the blade the incoming head, immediately severing it an instant after:

"Again!" I called for Sofia and laughed in joy as a second flaming arrow landed on the target.

One head unable to rise, four gone and five to go. I counted with glee, jumping back and repeating my assault, empowered by the sea. I was far from being able to exercise the kind of absurd shit Percy Jackson had shown by the end of the books, but a simple reinforcement of my body's capabilities was something I was able to do. It had to be a conscious effort on my part, unlike Thalia's way of doing it. I repeated the previous sequence of attack and defense, again and again, taking out one head at a time and waiting for Sofia to cauterize it before passing to the next. My arms soon felt like lead and every breath came out as a ragged rasp, the illusions I usually had no problems crafting out of Mist soon became difficult details that escaped my thoughts, fraying themselves and falling apart as soon as I stopped dedicating all of my focus to it.

That meant that as I had to face the last two heads, I was pretty much out of juice.

I stood on the roots, waiting for it to come closer, and appreciating Charles' effects on the branches like never before, as they swayed over its last eye and allowed me to stay out of sight. There were only two heads left, only one of which still had eyes. Luckily enough it was the head with limited mobility, but sadly the Hydra had apparently figured out how to manage a shared field of sight.

My head dipped slightly, as I felt exhaustion kicking in with a vengeance, and I started to see the world as from the bottom of a well. I blinked blearily through the dusty feeling that was trying to force my eyes closed, distractedly deciding to take stock of my situation. An uncomfortable pressure made itself known in my side, and as I lowered my unfocused eyes, I saw that a branch had buried itself in my back and was proudly sprouting out from my belly.

"ADAMAS!" With that war cry, demigods swarmed the clearing, arrows pelting the still working eyes of the monster and jars of

terracotta exploding against its skin, unleashing greek fire like confetti.

With that last image not making sense in my mind, I lost my last grasp on consciousness.

No Fairness In Death

NO FAIRNESS IN DEATH (OR SLEEP)

ANNABETH POV

Icarus had forbidden me from leaving the Adamas. I couldn't believe it. *How can he?* I got it, I had messed up, but it was *months* before! Since then I had been on my best behaviour, I listened, I learned, and I even forced myself to stop before pointing out when someone was doing something stupid. *Luke wouldn't have left me to rot.* I thought bitterly.

I sighed, once more going over the knots that I had been assigned to learn: "The Bowline, also known as the king of knots, has multiple purposes aboard ship. A bowline creates a fixed loop on the end of a rope and is used for hitching, mooring and lifting. Because it tightens when stressed, the knot gets tighter when pulled. The bowline is tied by forming a loop, bringing the free end of the rope to pass through the eye, wrapping the rope around the standing line and back down through the loop before tightening." my hands ran over the rope as I enunciated the correct procedure to craft said knot, and in less than ten seconds, it was ready.

I sighed, before undoing it and passing to the next of my list: "The clove hitch is often used for tying something up temporarily, often attaching a rope to a pole or stanchion. The clove hitch is formed by hanging the rope around the support and creating a loop, passing the rope from behind and tightening to form a knot." and once more my hands followed the motions that I had spent days to learn, flawlessly crafting the knot.

Once more, I undid it and passed to the next, all the while explaining to the air what my hands were doing: "The round turn and two half-

hitches is used for holding mooring lines by fastening a rope to a fixed object such as a post, ring or tree. The round turn and two half-hitches are created by wrapping the end of a rope around the support and taking it around the standing end of the rope. Another turn is made before taking the end of the rope out of the loop."

I sighed tiredly and *dropped* the piece of rope with disgust: "I swear, if I have to prepare a single other knot, I'll scream!" then the unthinkable happened: a hand anded over my head and ruffled my hair! *Who is the idiot that soon will find himself with a stump at the end of the arm?* I whirled on myself and snarled at my assailant, my hand already unsheathing the knife that Luke had gifted me.

"Whoah kid, no spilling blood in the galley, you know how Hannah gets when dealing with hygiene." The unbearably calm and unconcerned voice of David made me unconsciously sag my shoulders. *Maybe cutting him would make him remember to keep his grease-stained hands to himself!* My free hand rose tentatively to check my hair, finding it clean from whatever disgusting waste the son of Hephaestus usually tinkered within the engines' room. My surprise momentarily stopped me from giving him a proper tongue lashing, and it must have shown on my face since he hunched forward me, grinning like a loon: "Hannah had me scrub my hands raw the last time I came in here with a tiny smudge on them, you pretty blond hair is safe."

My hair is pretty? I asked myself, not that I could care less: "Yes, well, keep your hands to yourself anyway, thank you very much!" I hissed threateningly.

"You're welcome." he nodded seriously before walking towards the fridge and taking out some fish soup of the day before and chucking the whole thing in the microwave. "Welcome?" I repeated, *Gods this is so frustrating I was being sarcastic!* "That is the part you focus on? Not me threatening you with a knife?"

"You'll be more intimidating in a few years kid, give it time, for now... well, you're just adorable, one of my sisters would have built a robot-

teddy bear of you, by now." David answered, causing me to grab the rope I had previously thrown un the floor and toss it in his bowl of fish soup, forcing him to scamper to make sure it didn't fall in. *I'm not adorable, I'm scary! I am a genius daughter of Athena!* I growled and turned to leave the galley. *Some fresh air will make sure I don't kill him in the Galley.* I thought to myself, it would upset Hannah anyway, and she had a way to look at you making you feel sorry for being alive that I couldn't quite explain.

Then the bell resonated on the deck, making me run faster up the stairs and reach the rendezvous point, where Hailey of all people was panting out warnings to Charlotte, a daughter of Ares, who was already sporting the bloodthirsty grin that she and her siblings had clearly inherited by their godly father: "Ok, we're dealing with a giant snake, multiple heads, venomous. Emily!" She concluded her speech with a shout to her sister.

The demigoddess in question was already geared up with a couple of spears held in her hand, a giant round shield on her back and a sword to her hip: "Yes?"

"Ask David for some fire, then lead the others, I set up traps for a big ass snake on the way, if you have to retreat try to have it flail around!" Charlotte quickly rattled off, just as Jillian started shaking her head: "No, David and his sister can set up the traps, Emily and Charlotte you two are with me, we'll charge on one side as soon as we approach, Abigail pick up ambrosia and your bow, we'll need it."

As she was talking she reached the side of the ship, pulling a bag over her shoulder which had Φωτιά printed on the side. My eyes read 'fire' without stumbling, and I marvelled at the foresight of whoever had decided to name the stuff that could be immediately useful in ancient greek, sparing us headaches on occasions like this. Quietly, I set a rope on the opposite side of the ship and let myself fall off, quickly climbing down and soon reaching the sandy beach under the Adamas.

Asking for permission would have been stupid, I would never get it, but I would observe quietly and help if needed, otherwise I would return back immediately in order to avoid being discovered.

I followed the team of four demi goddesses at a distance, before running straight while hidden by the tall herbaceous weeds that rose thirty centimetres over my head, and then balancing myself instinctively on the partially underwater roots of the mangroves. After maybe fifteen minutes of nonstop run on the irregular terrain, I heard Jillian's group disappear in a clearing that was somehow lower than the rest of the submerged ground while shouting "ADAMAS!" and when I had reached them, I momentarily froze. In the centre of the area a snake was flailing horribly, several stumps were smoking at the base of its neck, while two heads were rapidly reacting to the new enemy.

Just as I saw Charlotte anticipate Jillian and move to slash away a head that was already weakened by the previous fight with Icarus' group, everything clicked: a Hydra. Emily shouted a warning and her sister held back from completing the attack, turning it into a wide swing with the flat of her blade that batted away the incoming second head. "Greek Fire!" Jillian shouted as she started throwing small vases on the beast: "Abi! Rescue Icarus, we'll hold the Hydra!"

I widened my eyes as I saw the daughter of Apollo sling her bow on her torso without hesitating and running on the edge of the clearing, jumping with precision from root to low branch until she had reached her objective, and when I looked at him, a gasp left my lips. He was covered on small cuts and scrapes typical of those who had been chunked across the woods far too many times, his sword was a strange lump of half molten bronze at his feet, while I could distinguish at least three different pieces of his shield in different places. Worst than everything anyway was his abdomen. A piece of wood as thick as both my wrists had pierced him, and from the bloodied first half of the wood that was laying at his feet, I could imagine the succession of events that had led to it. He had been unlucky, it was simple as that.

He had been likely tossed away by the enormous snake several times before, with all probability counting over his shield to smooth down the blow on his back, only that the last time the shield was already in pieces and he had encountered a branch at an angle that didn't allow it to either bend or break in a way that would avoid Icarus getting stabbed. *What can I do, what can I do?* I thought furiously, my mind running over options and discarding them faster than I could properly imagine them: in a melee, I would not only distract Jillian, Charlotte, and Emily, but would likely only get myself killed, I had a knife, not a ballista to use. I wasn't strong enough to use Abigail's bow, and I didn't know how to heal... Going towards Icarus would likely only distract Charles, who was doing the inhumanly possible to grant everyone a stable ground on which stand but the Hydra, who was constantly harassed by the leaves. "I... can't do anything..." I murmured out loud.

"I'm out of arrows!" another voice resounded in the clearing "I used the last ones to keep the heads off Icarus!"

As I looked around, I suddenly found how I could help. I moved as fast as I could on the other border of the strange clearing, soon enough finding myself at Icarus' side, Abigail's hand were glowing of a pale golden and were placed over the deep gash over his belly. "I'll take your quiver to Sofia!" I spoke quickly, my hands working on the knots that secured it to the healer's belt. And two seconds later, I was gone, once more running on the outer side of the clearing being as careful as I could about not falling.

In less than a minute, I had reached Sofia general position: "Sofia! I've got Abigail's quiver!" I shouted. Four seconds later, the demigoddess moved amongst the higher branches of the groove, dropping on one of the lower branches and letting herself swing down while keeping her knees on the wood, only to quickly grab the quiver and shot back up among the leaves: "Stay here until we tell you it's safe!" She ordered/reprimanded me with a half-serious glare while she returned to position from where she could contribute to the fight.

Once more, I ran back to Icarus' side, carefully *not* looking at his grievous wound. "How can I help?" I asked, causing Abigail to divert momentarily her gaze to me, before sighing and frowning, turning immediately back to the slow words muttered in ancient greek that I couldn't make out, causing the golden glow of her hands to briefly intensify.

"Try to fashion a cot to carry him away as soon as he's stable." She ordered, and I nodded, glancing briefly at the ongoing fight before running back among the trees, looking for a couple of branches straight enough. Something like a bed sheet could be fashioned out of our shirts.

I had been waiting sitting in an out of the way angle while playing with the same length of rope I had been learning how to make knots with. It had been days, days of wait, as Sofia and Abigail went in and out, keeping up an unending, constant flow of whatever magical healing was. Finally, Sofia came out, this time looking directly at me and nodding with deep bags under her eyes. I scampered on my feet right away and ran to the door.

The infirmary smelled a bit, a mixture of blood, sweat and bitter herbs. The only occupied bed had low barriers on the sides to stop him from falling off in his sleep. I walked forward until I was at his side, and hearing my footsteps, he opened his bleary eyes to look at me: "You didn't jump in." he said softly with a smile.

"I... well, I wanted to, but... it would only have made things more difficult for everyone... so..." I didn't know how to answer.

"Well done." he managed to nod among the pillows. I stared at him surprised "But... I didn't help! I... was... I was useless, I didn't do anything!" and a bandaged hand landed on my head: "You've done well." he said.

"Thinking is rarely comfortable, but always a better alternative than simply acting. As your mother's daughter, I expect you to understand

it better than others." He spoke, and I found myself living again he last 'serious chat' we had, just after the... disaster on the Titan's island.

"I followed the others off the ship without asking for permission!" I protested: "Shouldn't you be angry with me!?" I didn't understand, at all, it was exactly the opposite thing he had told me the last time. He chuckled slowly, breathing deeply to gain enough breath to answer: "I'd say that the fear you felt seeing the Hydra less than ten meters from you is enough for your little escapade, considering that instead of jumping in and dying stupidly you kept your cool and found a good way to help."

I was left speechless, Icarus wasn't supposed to *make sense!* He was going against what he had punished me for the last time: "I saw that there were only two wounded heads when we arrived, you..." *for the gods, he was Strong. I've seen how it moved.* "How did you manage to kill so many with only Charles and Sofia as support?" if he wasn't going to scold me, I might as well try to learn something.

He tried to give out a chuckle, but when the first wheezing sound was leaving his lips, he was already asleep.

ICARUS POV

2 May 2001

Six months. It had taken me two months to be able to walk again without stabbing pain in my side at every single step, and another four to regain complete mobility. After painstakingly long sessions with Abigail, both of direct healing, physiotherapy, and casual sex, just to 'test my swing', I could now torque my body like I always did without needing to be careful about it. Sure, now I had a horrible lump of scars in my side, where the skin was just a tiny bit slow to stretch when needed, but the muscles beneath it were in working condition.

For some reason, the magic healing gifted to the daughters of Apollo shown itself to be less than effective with me. I had cursed myself many times in those months: 'Hitting an Oracle?' not a good idea. But even so, I knew that I would have done it again. In my mind was obvious that the Future had no reason to be known by mortals. Either stuff happened and we had 0 control over it, or our free will built the future with unerring precision. I had felt the weight of preordered events on my own skin when Zeus went and turned his own daughter into a fucking tree, and I lashed out on the closest representative of Fate.

I stood from my bed in the captain quarters marvelling at the utter lack of pains, needling, twinges and whatnot. I walked towards the small crate that had ben left on my desk and slowly opened it: the 'trophy' fro killing the Hydra had been declared to be given to me by everyone. After all, I was clearly the one who had paid the harshest price for the battle, beyond being the one to inflict the bigger damage and stalling it while the others organized themselves. The fang was easily fifty centimetres long, and it's normally white colour was partially hidden by an oily black sheen, so thin that it made the whole thing look grey.

I looked it for several moments, my mind easily falling back on the steps of the battle, recalling how I had to dedicate every ounce of concentration I possessed to controlling and directing my powers, which answered to my will only if it expressed an exact result. There was no 'uh, a pull in my gut, look, I won' copyrighted by Percy Jackson, and the difficult of handling the Mist while keeping a rough grasp on the water had felt akin splitting my own mind apart. I shook my head and closed the chest's lid, immediately imagining what kind of weapon could be built with it, the chains made of Stygian Iron and the branch taken from Era's garden. I left the room, focusing on the present and on my real objective. *We've been derailed from our target for so long already, how much longer will we be forced to stay on the sea?*

"People!" I shouted to the proper encampment that the crew had set up between the beach and the edge of the immense groove that covered the vast marsh: "I'm healed! Tomorrow, we set sail! Tonight, we get plastered!" a laugh of approval immediately answered me, with Abigail and Sofia taking out a couple of guitars to get started, Alexandra and Helena, like the proper daughters of Dionysus that they were, dragged out of the hull of the ship the wine we had left. Charles had joined the, rolling out a barrel from his personal reserves and playing reedpipes. They must have been going stir crazy, because, in less than fifteen minutes, Hanna left the ship, helped by Emily, carrying the brazier that we kept nailed in the galley.

After half an hour, I felt a slight warmth on the cork blessed by Dionysus, and I knew that he at least was rooting for us. I eyed the encampment with a distant gaze: it was hard to imagine that we, that is to say, 'my crew', since I was convalescent until recently, had pulled it off. Wary of further encounters we were unlikely to survive, several trees had been taken down and raised again in a wall that isolated the stretch of land that we had claimed for ourselves. We didn't go crazy with the buildings, even if the daughters of Athena on board of the Adamas had tried to build a fucking city when we needed barely a few solid yurts.

David had built himself a proper forge, out of boredom, no doubt, and everyone had found some way to keep busy. And since we were talking about teenagers with no supervision and no drug around, it meant a lot of sex. David and Demetra had quickly become a stable couple, as well as Emily and Madison, Hannah and Evelyn, and... I wasn't really keeping track of their relationships, I couldn't care less, even if I wished them all the good they could find in each other. Charles was a satyr of the Old Ways apparently, which meant that he was down for random sex during the kickass party thrown with Dionysus' blessing, but he would wait for a proper Nymph otherwise.

Emily had kept pummeling everyone with the excuse of a spar, and it resulted in everyone being much more competent with a vast array of weapons, while Jillian had taken to devise strategies that the

others had quickly learned the ins and outs of. All in all, the last six months had done a lot of good to my crew.

Annabeth eyed the glass I handed her with a wary expression: "Are you giving me alcoholics?" I laughed, it was so absurd being happy about having survived a fucking Hydra? "Only a little, with some nectar to cut it off, you'll like it, and it won't be enough to damage your liver."

I kept an eye on Annabeth, who had become the official mascot of the *Adamas*. She was either ten or eleven years old, and she kept trying to sound as serious as possible, while trying to think ways to find Thalia's island without needing to roam without purpose. I scoffed lightly: she had no idea of the sheer pettiness the gods were capable of, even if she was acutely aware now that actions had consequences. Even while driving, dancing and becoming generally molest, each member of the crew walked on eggshells around her, maybe covered by the steely glint in her eyes, characteristic that she had obviously inherited from her mother.

"Why so glum?" a voice

"I'm not claimed, I thought you knew." She answered, causing me to shrug: "I knew that the others were claimed because they lived in the other gods' cabins, otherwise they might as well be strangers: I knew what they felt and what motivation they could have to join me, it was enough. It's the same for you."

"I have an idea about who my godly parent actually is." she announced, causing me to raise an eyebrow, surprised at her insisting on the topic: "I know mine too." I offered, not really seeing the point. She knew, good for her, she could more easily find out her powers and better train herself, but I sure as hell didn't need to know.

"When we had to face the Hydra, you had me on a support role, like I was a daughter of Hermes." she accused me. "And so?" I shrugged again, taking another swing from my cup: "You're good in that role."

I gestured to the festive encampment: "Everything went well in any case, did it not?" I could almost see her take a step back from me towards an area where the light from the fires was dimmer. "I'm the one responsible for 'everything going well' in the past months." she trailed off a bit, before taking a deep breath, clearly preparing herself for a big revelation: "I am a daughter of Hypnos." She announced, obviously expecting me to freak out.

"My mother is Hekate, my father a very old son of the King of the Sea." I answered in kind, I didn't see any kind of problem in telling it to Hailey in what was clearly a secretive fashion, her secret for mine: "I know." she replied, and there I frowned, there was a little clue about Poseidon in the way I fought and managed to keep up with Thalia, but for her to guess... *Didn't she say that everything went well in the camp because of her? What did she do, manipulated their dreams to keep them appeased?*

"I may have pushed certain dreams in a specific direction to keep everybody calm." She confirmed my theory without blinking, and I frowned some more. *If she's been able to somehow gleam my parents from my sleep, what's to say that she didn't discover that Hekate pulled me out of some kind of Beyond?* Then she finally decided to bring out what had truly been gnawing at her: "Icarus, why my uncle is interested in you?"

"Your uncle?" I repeated dumbly. *Wait a minute... Oh, Shit.* I cursed immediately in my head as I realized what had happened: Hypnos was the son of Nyx and Erebus, the twin brother of Thanatos, the Death himself. It wasn't a coincidence that in the myth death so closely resembled a deep sleep: I had surely walked the line between the two realms in the first days of my healing, but for Hypnos to take notice, or worse, his twin?

I had the growing suspicion that Hekate hadn't been entirely truthful when she told me of my origins, after all, what could interest Death itself if not the result of some necromancy? Not for the first time, I cursed a bit at the domains that my mother ruled over.

Okay, I thought, taking a deep breath, New Objective: staying away from the twin of Death, let's see let's see... In Greek myth, Hypnos is variously described as living in the underworld, which would make it safe for me to roam around, or on the island of Lemnos. At least according to Homer, who I would take somewhat as the Top authority in this field.

"Icarus why in your dreams you know the future?" Hailey asked me, and I cursed some more.